

THE CRABS OF BANGUI

LINUS ASONG



VISIT...

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Linus T. Asong



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Dedication

For My Dear Wife, Teresa Ajab Asong
Whose suggestions and perceptive reading of the draft
Helped me improve on the quality of the story

Chapter One

After sailing over the city ominously and menacingly for three days the rain finally came down with all its fury, in rapid waves, as though it had decided to come and stay. It started with a gentle breeze that blew all night, as if the sprawling city, a veritable god, lay in unquiet slumber while a million invisible spirits fanned him with as many palm fronds while he slept. By the first cock's crow it was already graduating into a gale that tore plantain and banana leaves into shreds and crushed the old, rusty, dry and falling leaves against the naked branches and rough barks of ageless and crooked mangoes, pears, oranges and countless other fruit trees at the foot of the huge antiquated Boma trees interspersing the gardens and surrounding farmlands. Zinc was torn off rooftops and swept to different quarters where it ended up in unrecognizable rubbles in gutters and bushes. Finally, in the very small hours of the morning an uncontrollable storm mixed with devastating rain tore through the entire neighbourhood.

It was unsafe to travel at such moments for all but hunters and perhaps thieves and armed robbers. They left their homes as soon as it started to rain in order to track down small game, rat moles, cane-rats and even pythons and other species of snakes that had been frightened out of their hiding places by the fierceness of the rain. Thieves also took advantage of the noise and disturbances created by the downpour to break into people's homes and business centres undetected, giving support to the popular adage that when things are bad, they make others better. Here a lucky butcher was seen with two gigantic cane-rats, two fruit bats,

a wriggling, bleeding, headless python strapped to a pole which he carried over his injured shoulders; there, two fortunate thieves passed by looking like gentlemen, one holding his loot, a brief case containing jewellery and watches, the other carrying a small bag of rice, his pockets stuffed with mobile phones and chargers he had just stolen from an unlucky shop in the heat of the rain; here an old woman passed with a basin of snails she had collected from under the coffee and cocoa trees, she kept pushing them back into the basin with a piece of wet stick as they continued to crawl to the edge of the basin in the vain hope of finding some escape; here a hungry, scrawny dog rummaged the rubbish heaps, competing with bony pigs with which they put up a stubborn fight over some foodstuff.

It worsened just when children were getting ready to go to school, or parents preparing to leave for work in their various destinations, putting to the severest test the courage of the pupils and also that of their teachers. It was good luck for those few who had parents who could drop their children off at school. The rest, and of these only those who could really brave it, would have to make it through the drenching rain which threatened to swallow them up in the pools in the centre of the road and drag them down to their death in the gaping gutters by the roadside.

No umbrella was good enough, and those who had raincoats of any sort and even shattered umbrellas joined some who had nothing but coco yam and plantain leaves, and they all could be seen clung together for warmth on verandas. But not for long because the malicious rainwater was fast eating its way up into the walls of the houses. Some very daring ones were playing games in the torrential rains: girls of marriageable ages but still in the primary school rolled up their uniforms up enough to expose their underpants and heavy enticing thighs. They were pretending to be throwing and catching a ball across the street, while

all they were doing was advertising their maturity, their large breasts dangling from side to side as they threw themselves about carelessly. They were presently joined by college girls with their school bags tucked off under their skirts. They were actually having a wonderful time.

“Look at how girls who are even supposed to be completing college are throwing themselves half-naked across the street. And very soon they will say parents are not taking care of their children,” Madam Ndikum, a middle-aged lady who had taken shelter on the veranda, observed with bitterness.

“It is as if you were reading my mind,” Madam, a young man who had also been watching the scene keenly remarked.”

“I saw the way you shook your head,” the woman admitted, “and saw that you too did not like it.”

“Not one bit,” the young man said. “When they complain everyday about teenage or unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS, that is the door to it. Not that it justifies men’s actions in any way, madam, but indecent exposure is already a good distance down the highway lane of immorality and perversity.”

“I can understand you, sir...”

“My name is Franklin,” he introduced himself. “When men are tempted they fall. It’s only normal.”

“And the girls are throwing themselves about deliberately enticing the men,” the woman put in. “Shame.”

“You people are surely not considering a very important item in your argument,” another young man pointed out half-smiling to himself. He was also following their observations with great interest.

“What item is that,” the woman turned to him.

“CONDOM, the condom factor,” the youth said half-seriously.

“What about it, whatever you call yourself?”

“Benji, Madam, Benjamin,” he cleared his throat, obscenely grabbing with his left hand the frontage of his trousers around the zip as if he was about to make water, or as if something inside the pants irritated him. “Condom is the key. Whatever they do, however well they expose themselves, however badly the men are tempted, if they use condoms, there will be no damage done.”

“You don’t sound serious,” the lady said.

The young man thrust his hand in his pocket and pulled out a packet labelled PRUDENCE, containing four smaller packets of condoms which he gleefully stretched out to everybody’s view, and said to the now uneasy woman: “You cannot say I am not serious madam”

Whatever the other young man, Franklin and the woman were going to say, Benji about condoms, the condom conversation was interrupted by the arrival of another group of about ten children who came marching by hand-in-hand, skirts rolled up, singing between clattering teeth.

“All these would surely not reach school, the woman said, glad to have changed the topic which was getting her worked up. But it did not seem to bother them one bit. In school the teachers would wait for a while and when children were not forthcoming they would go away to their different engagements. The rainy season was usually one of confusion.

But some people were unlucky. As everybody was hurrying by a taxi man who had barely managed to swim across a large pool, momentarily halted in the centre of the road to adjust the windshield wiper which seemed to be going too slowly for the rainwater dripping onto the windshield. It had more than a full load of school children, some sitting on the laps of others. After all, it was raining so the police would not interrupt. He did not leave the car completely but put one foot down and used his left hand to activate the blade. Thinking that he had solved the problem, he put in his left foot, shut the car and tried to drive off.

The generator of the windshield wiper stopped completely, then, following that, the car engine too ceased. The pool had risen within only a few seconds to meet them where they were stuck. Only pleading from the driver saved them by having the wet children push them out to safety where he remained to check what was wrong with the vehicle.

“We will hear about this rain,” a woman passing by said with great foreboding. And in fact, they did hear about the rain because later in the evening it was reported that two school girls were swept away to their death while trying to use two tiny sticks to cross a ravine behind the Government school.

At about ten o'clock the weather began to clear, really heavy, piercing drops were reduced to a sporadic spray, as if the gods were rationing the drops. White clouds appeared in large quantities and began to sail in masses towards the east where they may convert into rain clouds overnight and repeat the exercise of rain in the eastern regions. Through the mass of cloud a blue sky began to make its appearance and the sun actually appeared at eleven o'clock, causing the earth and the wet leaves to give up light curly fumes that rose into the damp atmosphere.

A brownish-red Peugeot 504 had pulled up at the centre of the untarred road directly in front of the main entrance into G.Y.Y., St Katherine's Girl's Teachers' College. It was signalling to turn left into the college campus. It was just from the washing point and water could be seen dripping from the mudguards and along the sides as if it had been dipped in a pool or had been driven through heavy rains. The bonnet, doors and the top of the car gave up vapours from water which might have splashed on to the engine during the washing. The car glittered in sunlight, implying that after washing some engine oil had been applied all over the body to give it the sparkling tinge.

Talking about the untarred nature of the road, one remembers almost immediately that the three-kilometre stretch of road covering the distance between the old market bridge and the railway station had been the subject of much criticism over the years. Although its surface had never seen anything else but laterite, the government records showed that it had been twice tarred within the last ten years. When the council was being run by the government party, it branded the New Layout which included this portion as opposition territory and decided to punish the people or at least deprive them of any amenities. When it applied for and was given money to tar the road, it did not do so but noted that the road had been tarred and classified the document. When the opposition took over the council it could not tar the road because it was mixed up in court cases with the previous council asking for the money which it received to tar the road. They had a strong case, and had good lawyers, but the opposition had won only a few councils and not the power to rule the country and as the saying went, *'where tigers are judges, the goats never win.'* The case was still in court and would be there for many years to come. The road too was still untarred and would remain so for many years to come. As the old adage said, 'when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.'

On this day of the heavy rains the G.Y.Y. stretch had suffered the same fate as the rest of the city – it nearly foundered in rainwater. Places were just drying up.

There was a large iron gate into G.Y.Y. In a little hut inside the gate sat the gate man. He was most probably from the northern part of the country because he had elongated features and pronounced tribal marks that ran from the corners of his mouth to his ears. His nose was long, his forehead long and protruding and his mouth wide. He was chewing something, probably kola nuts. On his head was a large dilapidated raffia hat and a brown jumpa that was torn around the shoulders and worn threadbare at the

seams. Seeing where the visitor was signalling he had risen and was standing and holding the iron structure at the centre, in readiness to pull it open.

The visitor flickered his light for the *nth* time at an oncoming vehicle. He was lucky to finally find a driver who appreciated the difficulty in which he found himself. This one, a Hiace bus, flickered his headlights too and came to an abrupt halt.

The visitor glanced at his rear mirror just to make sure and over his shoulder, lurched forward and tried to swing left into the gate. There was supposed to be a policeman at the junction to control traffic. But because of the rain, traffic had been scanty all morning. The policeman had taken advantage of this to enjoy himself at a nearby bar. Noticing from behind the Hiace bus that there was nobody to check him a taxi man (with three persons in the front seat instead of the normal two and four persons at the back instead of three), charged dangerously and nervously and overtook the bus. The visitor as alert as a hunting dog slammed on the brakes so brusquely he hit his chest on the steering wheel. In his attempt to avoid a head-on collision, the car swung and swerved, almost facing the direction from which he had been coming. The taxi man merely brushed and dented his own passengers' door against the back bumper of the Peugeot 504 and skidded off the road. It hit an embankment before regaining the tar and continuing with the same breakneck speed. Two healthy roosters tied together cut themselves loose from the boot and fell into a pool of water by the road side.

Pedestrians scampered into the bush for their dear lives, screaming at the top of their voices while other road users cursed and shouted obscenities at the driver who just kept fleeing. It was this commotion that brought the drink-sodden policeman to his senses and to his feet. Forgetting himself for a second in that confusion and mistaking it for a whistle he blew into the bottle of beer he was holding before coming

to his senses. His round face, with the sharply up-turned nose and short brownish moustache above a small mouth, was sweaty and noticeably bloated, as so often happens with people in the police force who drank a lot without spending a franc. He realised his own folly and searched for his whistle which he blasted from where he was sitting and made for the pool where the two cocks were whimpering. First thing he rescued them and then reached for a note book and a pen from his knee pocket and then began to peer through the haze of alcohol-ridden eyes in the direction of the speeding taxi. He did scribble something in the notebook but was more satisfied with the two cocks than the number of the vehicle which everybody could have sworn he did not see.

He called a boy from the bar where he had been drinking and flung his booty to him to place near his remaining drink. Dangling and swaying from side to side with drink, he did very little to control the traffic, but his presence put some order into the driving and within seconds the road was passing as if there had not been any incident there. He soon returned to empty his bottle and change the spot of control in order to avoid being detected either by the passenger who lost the chickens or by the driver himself. He was not ready to part with his good luck. But he was not that lucky because both the driver and the owner of the fowls soon traced him. The driver preferred to admit his fault of careless driving and pay the regular 500 francs or at most 1000 francs to paying 7000 francs for the fowls.

But the policeman would not be deprived of his good fortune so easily. He began by charging the driver for trafficking in fowls without a signed Veterinary Certificate, a charge which carried with it a very heavy fine on account of diseases which such an activity could spread across divisional boundaries. By the time he turned round the real owner of the fowls had disappeared, cursing the stupid driver for bringing such a heavy loss on her through his own carelessness. In the end, in addition to the fowls the

policeman was 2000 francs richer because the driver had to plead for his release with the promise that he would never transport any animals without a license.

By the time the visitor wheeled in the gate was partially open, the gate man stood in the centre, holding on to one side of the gate.

“Is na visit, oga sa?” the gate man asked the visitor, trying to sound educated.

“No,” the man snapped.

“Bisnet?”

“Yeah,” the visitor said, still panting nervously from the accident he had just missed.

The gate man pulled both sides of the gate open and he drove in. St. Katherine was legendary for its discipline and cleanliness, he was there to see it for himself. Already, from where he stood, the story did not look like a myth. The college occupied a surface area of about two acres. The frontage alone ran for over a hundred metres parallel to the road until it turned off right towards the railway station. A grass lawn spanned the entire length of the frontage along a fence that ran parallel to the main road. The fence was made of a cement wall of about a metre high. An iron network of about the same height extended all the way up. The inside of the fence was lined with cypress trees trimmed to take level with the height of the iron work which added another metre to the height. Apparently competing with the passing trains in loudness, there were two busy lawn mowers, one on each side of the entrance, keeping the grass low. Each lawn had a large flowerbed of carefully selected and sweet smelling varieties. Each of the flowerbeds carried a message meticulously shaped into letters of the alphabet: WELCOME TO ST. KATHERINE, GOD IS KING, NO PIDGIN ENGLISH, CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS, and the like. On one of them an old man sat on a low stool executing with painstaking thoroughness

the activities which made the lawns so attractive: he was uprooting with his gloved fingers blades of unwanted plants and keeping the characters well-formed.

The college proper comprised three major segments to the front – to the extreme left, a Domestic Science–cum–Home Economics Centre. This was a spacious vestibule with low wide windows, working tables, a dining table, cooking utensils, and a kitchen with a large oven. The administrative block housing the principal's office, the visitor's room and the library came next. All the buildings were constructed with baked red-soil bricks some thirty years ago. All the roofs with a few exceptions were made of tiles from baked red soil. There were several extensions to the back which contained the dormitories, the refectory and classrooms and a small chapel. To the southern extreme right end of the library was a large playground. Activities on the playground did not disturb the library because the school programme was so arranged that students went to the playground when others were either engaged in gardening or domestic science.

There was a circular lawn at the centre of which rose an iron pole on which hung the national flag. At the base of the pole on the side facing the road ixora flowers had been tendered and trimmed to form the words WELCOME TO ST KATHERINE. On the inside, facing the way that led to the entrance into the principal's office was another flowery message, IN GOD WE TRUST.

The visitor drove to the parking lot and stopped, came out of the car and straightened his coat and tie. He locked the car, felt all the doors and made towards the principal's office. About ten metres to the office he stopped and went back to his car in a hurry. He opened the passenger's side and took a leather file jacket which he put under his left armpit. As he lifted his head to turn to go into the principal's office he discovered a Campus Guard standing by him, ready

to render him service. An atmosphere of almost semi-military discipline enfolded the compound. Not only was every nook and cranny scrupulously swept and kept clean, there were dustbins and signboards at various corners of the campus announcing the need for cleanliness and self-discipline.

‘Goodaftnoons sa, you wants to sees sombodies, sa?’ the man enquired, struggling to ensure that the ban on pidgin English remained in force.

The visitor smiled faintly and admitted:

“Yes, I would like to see the principal. Is she in?”

“In sa, comes wits me to sees princpal.”

The man led the way. In the waiting room the guard told him:

“Sits here sa, I tells de princpal.” Although Sister Angella-MacDonald had long sighted the stranger from the time he wheeled into the gate, she could not interrupt her sacred duty: she was disciplining a student who had broken bounds.

“You go and get your parents,” she was saying, “the verdict if final. Even if this were your very first offence, Mariana, it is bad enough. Just look at the premeditated nature of the crime: you dress a dummy and put on your bed and you steal out of campus and return only in the morning, and you call this an accident. If you call this an accident, what would you call lateness? Anyway the disciplinary committee has decided. Leave.”

As the dismissed student walked dejectedly out of her office Sister Angella-MacDonald rose from her seat in the inner room of her office and came to stand at the door, muttering half to herself. She had come to the door with a lesser anxiety to meet her guest than to forestall and frustrate any interlocutor who might hope to send a sign to any of his closely guarded girls. Already, as soon as the vehicle was driving in, the visitors had noticed from the corner of his eye heads appearing and disappearing again at the windows of the library and domestic science hall.

She looked just the right kind of creature to look after young girls, the kind of woman with everything to envy in a young beautiful lady. She did not seem to have looked beautiful at any period of her life. She could only be described in masculine terms. Even then, she was not exactly handsome, reminding the visitor of a certain rural science mistress they had in the Primary School whom they branded as yam. She was not only fat but plump. Generally women are narrow at the shoulders, slightly thin around the waist before opening out again around the buttocks. There was no waistline on Sister Angella-MacDonald. The entire upper body was one mass of flesh like a barrel with two tiny bumps in front. The legs were a pair of continuous yam-like lumps, without any signs of a part you could describe as a knee. It must be an effort to bend the knees. She had a pronounced forehead, small darting eyes with thick folds of skin below the eyelids through which her heavy-rimmed spectacles had carved arcs. She had a small pointed nose and a mouth, an orifice to be precise, that looked like that of a Japanese toy. It seemed only capable of opening and closing but incapable of distending into a smile of any sort. She spoke imperfectly, as though she had sweets in her jaws.

On her small feet she was wearing a pair of thin leather sandals which ate right into her ankles. She was wearing a pair of white socks which concealed her stunted toes. Her fingers were so thick and rounded that it was a miracle how she could hold a pen and produce the beautiful handwriting which she possessed.

She was polite in her greetings, but without warmth and went straight to the point of his coming, glancing at her watch to suggest that she did not have enough time to waste.

The visitor had come with one purpose in mind, to use all the wiles and guile with which he was so plentifully and naturally endowed to put behind him two matrimonial

disasters. Several years back, his junior sister Matilda introduced him to a young beautiful lady, Vera. She hailed from the Akamanang-Ntang region as well. At that time marriage was not amongst his priorities but he made it clear to Matilda that Vera was the type of girl he would like to marry when the time came. Matilda seized on it and began pumping Vera with news and information from and about her brother, sometimes some of it completely false. She fabricated messages and greetings as coming from Vera to Hansel and vice versa. Each time she met Hansel she never failed telling him about good wishes from Vera. The same thing happened whenever she met Vera. Thus, before they realised it, Hansel and Vera were really thinking about each other seriously, with the result that Hansel decided he would get married sooner than he had planned, to Vera.

This was very welcome news for the match-maker, Matilda and Vera her bosom friend. All this while, the relationship had been kept secret from both parents. When Hansel convinced himself that he would marry Vera, he decided one day to inform his father. His father received the news with much joy. For many years he had been looking forward to the day when he would carry Hansel's child, his grandchild. But when he asked and was told the identity of the girl who was brought and physically introduced to him, he wept.

"This is your sister," Ta'ata Bolingo told Hansel. "This is the granddaughter of Ma Patricia Fomelong. Ma Patricia Fomelong is of the same maternal grandfather with your mother." That relationship was sufficiently intricate, but what was important was the fact that they could not get married. For all the love that they bore each other, Hansel and Vera were condemned to look elsewhere for life partners. They were greatly saddened by the outcome of events but accepted it in good faith and gradually forgot about it altogether.

One year afterwards Matilda went to work again and made another catch. Her name was Gwendolyn. Matilda established from the start that they were not related in any way. She was 19 years old and had just written her G.C.E. Ordinary Level Examination. If she passed she would enter St Katherine's G.Y.Y. Gwendolyn had everything to recommend her. Not only did Hansel personally find her very lovable, she was accepted and loved by Hansel's parents, brothers and sisters. She was beautiful, brilliant and polite with very polished manners. She was of average height, just as fair as Hansel in complexion but with very bold features. Her mouth was wide and expressive, so were her eyes, below exceptionally long eyelashes. Her nose was rather flat with slightly wider than normal nostrils. A little bit on the thin side, she had an elongated neck under a round chin with strands of hair dotted here and there. She had very long hair which she plaited with black thread into a design which rose like horns of a buffalo and artfully wound backwards until they touched her shoulders.

Chapter Two

Over the months all traditional and official rites were fulfilled. And then the big event, the church wedding! It took place on a Saturday in September. The weather was perfect. An early morning rain had added freshness to the heat of the sun which was far from being intense. It remained so for the rest of the day. From the church the guests moved immediately to the Small Mankon Hall for a grand reception. Everything went very well until friends and relatives were called upon to talk. The best man of the occasion, Hansel's colleague at the Bank, spoke very briefly about his friend. He described Hansel as an incarnation of self-discipline, hard work and honesty. He said he did not remember an occasion in which he had ever found Hansel exchanging an angry word with anybody, and that if he ever found anybody quarrelling with Hansel he would attack such a man without finding out what had happened. He concluded that he was a man of exemplary conduct, a dream husband, the kind of man whose company would always be enjoyed by any wife.

The best friend of the bride spoke. She was all praises. If shyness, uneasiness in the presence of boys, and modesty were virtues then Gwendolyn had them in abundance. Those who say there were no virgins left had never met a girl like Gwendolyn and she was assuring them that Gwendolyn had preserved the best that God gave her for the only man she has ever loved, Hansel Bolingo Motombo. She congratulated Hansel for winning the hand of a real virgin. She was very highly applauded. The sky began to darken outside and the coconut and palm trees could be

seen swaying from side to side. A whirlwind rose in the front yard of the church and became so violent that they had to shut the doors and windows for a while. After the whirlwind rain came and it fell so hard on the roof that people had to strain their ears to get everything that the speakers were saying.

Many other persons spoke. And then Grandma Philomena, the mother of Gwendolyn's own mother came in from the back of the hall to add her own voice to the talks. While everybody else spoke she was smoking her pipe behind the house, mentally rehearsing her own speech. She was a woman of very strong will who believed very strongly in the rightness of her actions. When it came to her turn to talk she trotted agilely to the floor and, standing before the newly wedded at the high table she announced:

"What is important in marriage is child bearing. No matter how rich you are, no matter how beautiful a woman is, if she does not give birth, that woman is useless. Why am I saying all this? I am saying this because if this my children go into marriage and do not have any children, you should know that it is the fault of Hansel (she called him Ans!)."

Nobody could really argue with that, but there was a low murmur and chuckles, ending in a general laugh which seemed to slightly disconcert big Mama. By this time the rain had ceased slightly and people could hear her even from the back of the hall. She hastened to make her point: "I am saying so because I know my blood. Gwendolyn is from a family that delivers like ants..."

There was a loud cheer, and then she threw the bomb. Thinking that the people's noises were signs of disagreement, she begged for silence and then, calling aloud, "Franchical!"

Francisca, a little girl of about eight who had been in the forefront of the flower girls, ran down holding up part of her overflowing garment. She went to stand excitedly in front of the old woman. Grandma lifted the little girl by the left hand. There was silence.

“Gwendolyn had this child when she was just twelve years, that’s why I tell you that we are from a family that delivers...”

There were loud cheers as well as much cross talk while she now took a seat in the front row, amongst the parents. Hansel’s dry lips stretched into an unwilling smile, perplexity and credulity clouded his eyes as he looked on with unseeing eyes. He swallowed loudly. Few people found anything amiss. Fewer still related what the old woman said to what Gwendolyn’s friend’s had said earlier about her virginity, and so missed the embarrassment Grandma’s revelation may have caused. Under the excitement of the moment, the guests had not noticed any real contradiction between what had been said and the little girl who had just been presented as Gwendolyn’s child. It took many of the guests a long time to digest Grandma’s message and to guess its terrifying implication for the wedding at hand. Hansel changed the position of his legs and used the invitation card to fan himself.

During those disturbing minutes Hansel recalled two occasions on which he had been warned about what he had just learnt. A co-worker at the bank who knew the family better than even Matilda, was said to have wondered why a handsome man like Hansel should be so hooked up to a “mamy pikin,” when there were more juicy girls around town. “Mamy Pikin” was the pidgin word for a nursing-mother. It could also refer to a grown up woman who may never have had a child. Hansel knew that friends and relatives always think that their brother is too good for the woman to whom he has been betrothed, and so were wont to make disparaging and totally unfounded statements about the intended girl. He took the comment on that light. Some other lady who knew that somebody who had intended to marry Gwendolyn had discovered that she already had a baby and then simply vamoosed, did her best to talk Hansel out of it but failed.

“Are you sure you know that girl very well?” the lady had asked, hoping that Hansel would press to know why she was curious about her and she would divulge the truth. But Hansel merely philosophised and left it at that.

“Can a human being ever know everything that is worth knowing about a woman?” he asked. “There is always a core of darkness in every human being which it was unnecessary to probe into because it would only discourage you. In a love situation, you need only to know *enough* about him or her....”

Now Hansel was cursing himself and cursing his sister Matilda for not trying to know more than *enough* about the girl. Just how much Matilda knew, he was unable to tell. But it was bad enough that she had led him into the mess.

Some amongst the visitors who discerned the “contradiction” assumed that Hansel shared in the secret surrounding the girl Francisca and that he may actually be the father of the little girl. Otherwise why should such a secret be disclosed only there and then? It was when they noticed a sudden burst of nervousness about Hansel that it began to dawn on them that the old woman may have leaked a secret that hurt him very dearly. A man who by nature as well as upbringing made it a habit never to betray his emotions of any issue no matter how disturbing, was conscious of perspiration from every pore on his body, streaming down his face and chest on its own accord, in rivulets which he tried in vain to blot and fan away. He instantly developed a murderous aversion for Gwendolyn.

It was not that he wanted absolutely or even anxiously to marry a virgin, and he would have known how to take it if she informed him while he was still courting her that she had had a baby out of wedlock. After all, those things happen. This she did not do but went on to create the impression that she had never known a man before she met him. How sad! Hansel felt unforgivably betrayed. She was

sitting to his immediate left, glued to her seat, her mind in flames too. She dared not turn right for fear of the stare of the cobra that had implanted itself on Hansel's face.

He felt flushed, almost feverish. A nameless fear and guilt and fury blended in a sudden thrust of gut-wrenching pain at the pit of his stomach. It was as if all of a sudden a switch had been turned somewhere inside him, shutting off power. He seemed to lose, for the first time, his proverbial self-control. He thought of rising to the centre of the floor and declaring the marriage null and void, and walking out and away from the ceremony. But he thought of the respectable guests he had invited and how badly they would feel. He mustered a superhuman courage and rose when the M.C. announced the cutting of the cake. Holding each other's hand for the last time they strolled to the tune of the brass band music, to the table that had been set for the purpose in the middle of the floor. A lady, a veteran housewife, helped them through the ritual. They fed each other and then strolled back to their seats. They rose again just once, to acknowledge the gifts. Hansel fought really hard to wipe off the anger that had distorted his face. The rest of the activities were done in a forced mood and when they returned home, Hansel decided to get rid of the burden on his heart.

He told her to return to her parents with all the gifts. Even nature helped to make the day a miserable one. The rain persisted, turning into hail and drumming so loudly on the roof that it cut conversation to a minimum. It was mixed with hail, some of it actually piercing the light zinc on the roof of the big hall. Visitors had to find their various ways home as soon as they had had something to eat.

"This thing cannot work, Gwendolyn," he said resolutely. "What I learnt this afternoon from your Grandmother attacked the very core of my personal dignity and I cannot countenance it. It hurts me in a way I cannot describe, and it doesn't look like the kind of thing I can ever forget."



The marriage, in short, went no further than that. It wasn't that Hansel had been looking for a virgin to marry, far from it. It is just that Gwendolyn had never mentioned it even casually and he had no reason to doubt her. She often referred to Francisca as her kid sister. The little girl too never called her "mama," she always called "sister." It was her grandmother that she called "mama." Without caring to verify it from a third party, he was painfully convinced that the old woman had spoken the truth, in all innocence. That hit Hansel like a thunderclap. Only God knew what else she could be hiding from him. He glanced about him for a few nervous minutes and then rose, obtained an excuse and went out. Gwendolyn remained glued with shame where she sat at the high table with all the important members of the families that had been invited. Grandma had long returned to her corner behind the house where she was congratulating herself for having made her point. Nobody could ever convince her that the marriage had fallen apart, and that it was the revelation she made about her grand daughter that had caused it all.

He was never to set eyes on Gwendolyn again and refused to discuss the matter with anybody from either his family or any other. And he was not the kind of man to be persuaded once his mind was made up in a certain direction. Amongst the guests and even those who merely learnt of the embarrassment later, opinion was severely divided. There were those who blamed the girl, others blamed the grandmother, and many believed that Hansel had over-reacted. "Two wrongs do not make a right," many were heard to say. A certain Pastor making an obvious reference to it soon after the incident preached the painful tragedy of human weakness with which each and everyone of us must learn to live. "There are some purists amongst us," he went to say, "who want better bread than it is made from wheat."

When this got to Hansel's ears he refrained from defending himself:

"Let people who care about her marry her, let them get her another husband."

Concerning the very painful position in which he had placed the girl he argued that "people should marry for love and not out of sympathy for the emotions of the other." If she truly loved him she would have taken him into confidence and told him about it and possibly ask for forgiveness if it became necessary.

For months he ruled love and marriage out of his life, but his sisters talked him back into it. He would still get married, he told himself when he had got over the Gwendolyn disappointment. But he would not spend money and time studying a woman or courting her, he would not entrust the business into anybody's hands. He would not even want a girl from his area. He would simply pick a woman and make up his mind to love her. That was what had brought him to G.Y.Y.

Chapter Three

Sister Angella-MacDonald did not need to know about his past tribulations. He would approach her officially and look for an opportunity to see the final year students and make his choice from there. He knew that Principals of girls' colleges are notorious for guarding their students with the jealousy of a mother hen over her chicks. It did not matter to them whether they later became misfits or took to dissolute living as a result of the excessively cloistered life. What was important was their attitude towards their flock, that the girls should obey the regulations of the college so long as they remained students of the institution. Strangers on the campus, especially men, are viewed with great suspicion and even trepidation or aggression. It did not matter to them that these girls were being brought up to live with men and not to become Reverend Sisters.

"I am Bolingo Hansel, Sister, a senior accountant at the Bank. I just returned from a one-year course in banking in London. One of the areas for which I was sent to carry out research was the empowerment of women in the banking sector. Originally the bank had planned a series of lectures or even seminars to which girls would be invited. But we decided that it would be more effective to work with individual schools such as this. With your permission we could arrange for me to meet the students, especially those in the final year, and talk to them for about an hour."

The day and hour were fixed: Friday afternoon the following week. The lecture itself went very well and the girls were very enthusiastic about it. Sister Angella-

MacDonald herself was in attendance. At the end of the questions and answers session he invited those who were really interested to call at his office for further information. Since the lecture itself was merely a means to an end, it was only memorable because at the end of the day some five students showed a particular interest in taking up banking provided they had enough encouragement for training.

One of these students who reported at his office soon after that called herself Marion Bilikembe, a tallish, dark, soft-spoken lady. Her height was accentuated by an almost crane-like neck. There was a gap in her front teeth, both the upper and lower sections. Like everybody else in the college she wore her hair low and had tiny earrings like drawing pins in her smallish stick out ears. She had fairly large, widely set eyes that looked with piercing intensity below long eyelashes and thick eyebrows. Her mouth was as wide as her nose was wide and when she smiled, which she did ever so often, there was a dimple on either jaw.

Although she was wearing a dress that reached down below the knees, it was obvious that her legs were just as exquisite as her hands – soft, long and muscular but on the feminine side and her nails were long and whitish. She looked very womanly although her palms were a trifle rough from the grass-cutting and farming they did. She spoke as though you had a whole day to listen to her and had a way of smiling to herself that was very charming indeed. There was something of the athlete in her and she was slightly heavy below the waist. The only feature a bit out of the ordinary was the fact that she had a slightly bulging stomach which to a casual observer looked like a concealed pregnancy of a few months.

Appointments were made in his office at the bank, and before long Marion and Hansel found themselves inextricably bound to each other. Events moved fast, and on 20th of February 1983 they got married in the Town Hall. There were no hitches as of old although she had the ire of Gwendolyn's friends and relatives to contend with. They had done a lot of groundwork, telling the friends and relatives of Hansel how irresponsible he was, how he took pleasure in raising girls high and dry. But they came in rather late because before they really knew what was happening, Hansel and Marion had been engaged. Many in the Gwendolyn camp fought on, they warned Marion through her personal friends that she was wasting her time, that he went further than that with Gwendolyn but still abandoned her. Unfortunately for them, nothing of the sort was to happen. Hansel, a man who usually kept his word, had made up his mind to love and respect Marion. He was determined to love Marion, for better or for worse, even if anybody stood up and announced that she was a twin mother.

Despite the fact that their meeting was rather abrupt and events moved very fast towards marriage, the two of them lived as though they had known each other for years, as though they were actually meant for each other. One event that sealed their love for each other took place at the signing of the official documents at the mayor's office. In most cases, couples needed to discuss and agree at home, on the kind of marriage they would prefer. Quite often the men insisted on polygamy, while the women, not anxious to share their homes or their love with anybody else, usually prefer monogamy. Sometimes there is so much disagreement that the marriage dissolves.

In the case of Hansel and Marion, the issue of *monogamy* was not even raised and discussed between them. When the mayor asked Marion what kind of marriage she would prefer, she pointed at Hansel and told the mayor, "Ask him. Ask my husband."

“Over to you,” the Mayor said to Hansel.

“Monogamy,” Hansel said when they asked him, Marion looking on with quiet admiration.

“Monogamy, too,” Marion said. Spontaneously and to show how much he appreciated her instincts, Hansel rose and embraced Marion for a very long time.

At the door as they left he was forced to ask her with affectionate amusement, “why did you throw the question back at me? What if I said polygamy?”

“You could not have said that,” Marion said firmly. “For the short time that I have known you, you don’t look like somebody who would opt for polygamy.”

“Then you have read me very, very well,” Hansel said, congratulating himself in his heart for the lucky choice. He gave her a long, long kiss. Although in his mind he thought very much of “monogamy,” he would not have bothered very much if she had said “polygamy.” Such was the extent of his determination to stay happily with Marion.

Chapter Four

The circumstances of their meeting notwithstanding and the rumours in the air of many failed engagements in the past notwithstanding, Marion and Hansel had a happy and exemplary marriage. To the core and to the end, she was a very devoted housewife, spoke to her husband with love and respect and made sure that she never consciously or even unconsciously did anything to bring shame or embarrassment to the family. She was a real pearl, a workaholic of the first water. Scarcely ever finding time to really take a deserved rest after school, she was always working on her sewing machine or in the garden or mopping the floor, rearranging the furniture. They were blessed with four children in rapid succession which she adored just as she respected her husband: Philemon (1984), Henry (1987), Perdita (1990) and Jessica (1994).

When they got married Marion gave him an “Ego Assessment” exercise to complete as honestly as possible and return to her. She called it “a psychology game.” The purpose was to give her a very general idea of the personality of her partner:

A. Social Respect Vs social Contempt (how you feel other people perceive you or feel about you today

10. Excite the admiration and awe of everybody who matters
9. Stand extremely high in the estimation of people whose opinions count to you.

8. People I admire recognize and respect my good points
7. Confident that some people think well of me.
6. Feel you are appreciated and respected to some degree.
5. Some people don't seem to see much value in you.
4. You are looked upon as being of small or of no account.
3. People have no respect for you at all.
2. You are scorned, slighted, pushed aside.
1. Everybody despises you and holds you in contempt.

B. Sociability Vs Withdrawal (how socially outgoing or withdrawn you felt today)

10. Immensely sociable and outgoing.
9. Highly outgoing, congenial and friendly.
8. Very sociable and involved in things.
7. Companionable. Ready to mix with others.
6. Fairly sociable. More or less accessible.
5. Not particularly outgoing. Feel a little bit unsociable.
4. Retiring, would like to avoid people.
3. Feel detached and withdrawn. A great distance between yourself and others.
2. Self-contained and solitary.
1. Completely withdrawn. Want no human contact.

C. Love and Sex (the extent to which you felt loving and tender, or sexually frustrated and unloving)

10. Feel the rapture of full, joyous, and complete love
9. Tremendous gratification, delight, love and trust.
8. Warm sharing of intimacy and affection.
7. Pleasant companionship and some affection. Sharing interests and good times.
6. Fairly satisfying experiences or expectations. Some mutual interest and understanding.
5. Not much feeling of mutual understanding. Some lack of interest. Slightly frustrated.

4. Little feeling of relationship. Considerable indifference. Moderately frustrated.
3. Feel unable to maintain good relationships. Unloved. Much frustration.
2. Hurt, bewildered, incapable of loving or being loved. Vast amount of frustration.
1. Hopeless, cold, unloved and unloving.

D. Present Work (how satisfied or dissatisfied you were with your work)

10. Tremendous, intense delight in your work. Proud of your purpose, skill, and accomplishment.
9. Great pleasure and enjoyment in your work. Much fulfilment through work.
8. Considerable satisfaction with your work. Eager to continue.
7. Satisfied with my work. Encouraged to go on with it.
6. More or less satisfied with your work. Keep plugging along.
5. Somewhat dissatisfied with your work. Not much enjoyment doing it.
4. Dissatisfied with your work. Can't see much good in it. Moderately frustrated.
3. Greatly dissatisfied with your work. Not doing a good job. Markedly frustrated.
2. Tremendously dissatisfied and frustrated in your work. Befuddled. Disorganised.
1. Completely dissatisfied and frustrated in your work. Hopeless, useless chaos.

E. Thought Processes (how readily your ideas came and how valuable they seemed)

10. You are a surging torrent of spectacular insights.

9. Brilliant penetrating ideas emerging spontaneously and with great rapidity.
8. Ideas coming quickly and effortlessly.
7. Clever and keen.
6. Quite alert. Thoughts fairly quick and clear.
5. Not particularly alert. Your ideas trivial and commonplace.
4. Your mind feels ponderous and dull. My thoughts are slow and monotonous.
3. Your thoughts all seem weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable.
2. Your mind is stagnant. Almost nothing freshens it.
1. Your mind is cold, dead. Nothing moves.

F. Tranquillity Vs. Anxiety (how calm or troubled you felt)

10. Perfect and complete tranquillity. Unshakably secure.
9. Exceptional calm, wonderfully secure and carefree.
8. Great sense of well-being. Essentially secure, and very much at ease.
7. Pretty generally secure and free from care.
6. Nothing particularly troubling you. More or less at ease.
5. Somewhat concerned with minor worries or problems. Slightly ill at ease, a bit troubled.
4. Experiencing some worry, fear, trouble, or uncertainty. Nervous, jittery, on edge.
3. Considerable insecurity. Very troubled by significant worries, fears, uncertainties.
2. Tremendous anxiety and concern. Harassed by major worries and fears.
1. Completely beside yourself with dread, worry, fear. Overwhelmingly distraught and apprehensive. Obsessed or terrified by insoluble problems and fears.

G. Self-confidence Vs. Feeling of Inadequacy (how self-assured and adequate, or helpless and inadequate, you felt).

10. Nothing is impossible to me. Can do anything I want.
9. Feel remarkable self-assurance. Sure of your superior powers.
8. Highly confident of your capabilities.
7. Feel your abilities sufficient and your prospects good.
6. Feel fairly adequate.
5. Feel your performance and capabilities somewhat limited.
4. Feel rather inadequate.
3. Distressed by your weakness and lack of ability.
2. Wretched and miserable. Sick of your incompetence.
1. Crushing sense of weakness and futility. You can do nothing.

H. Prayer, Religion, Church (God fearing and dedicated church-goer or carefree atheist

10. Whether Presbyterian, Roman Catholic or Pentecostal, you are a selfless and devout follower of the teachings of your church. You have made your peace with God.
9. You pray everyday before and after meals, before going to bed and after rising from bed. You make sure that you pray wherever you are if you cannot go to church on a particular occasion.
8. Whenever it occurs to me I pray
7. God knows and sees everything, so why bother with prayers?
6. Why give donations to the church? The church has enough already.
5. Church going is a bore

4. You simply do what you think fit because you believe in predestination, you cannot change the fate God has set aside for you at birth.
3. I hate to see people who go to church, they are at best hypocrites.
2. Pastors, priests and preachers are all there to look for their money. None of them is honestly out to save a soul.
1. All churches ought to be burnt down, they interfere with our daily activities.

I. Entertainment (the games and activities you enjoy watching, playing and with what regularity?)

10. You attend parties whenever it is possible, you like watching football, you like playing snooker, tennis, and table tennis. When you cannot play you read, anything, from jokes to philosophy.
9. You attend parties twice a week, watch football at least once and play some lawn tennis once a month.
8. You don't like attending parties at all, hate watching football because of the cheating of the referees. You enjoy tennis every Sunday after church service.
7. My greatest past time is reading. You enjoy anything new – magazines, novels, adult magazines, philosophy, theology.
6. Whenever you feel like enjoying yourself, you listen to music – Makossa, highlife, rock, rap, anything. Music.
5. Whenever you wish to relax you go for a swim.
4. Whenever you want to relax you listen to classical music.
3. You never get bored, you are a workaholic
2. Whenever you feel bored by anything you give yourself a cool Guinness
1. Whenever you feel bored, you drink water.

**J. Receptivity towards and Stimulation by the World
(how interested and responsive you felt to what was
going on around you)**

10. Passionately absorbed in the world's excitement. Your sensations and feelings incredibly intensified.
9. Tremendously stimulated. Enormously receptive.
8. Senses lively. Great interest and delight in everything around me.
7. Open and responsive to my world and its happenings.
6. Moderately interested and fairly responsive.
5. Slightly disinterested and unresponsive.
4. Broad. Life pretty monotonous and uninteresting.
3. Dull and apathetic. Almost no interest or desire for anything.
2. Mired down in apathy. Your only desire is to shut out the world.
1. Life is too much trouble. Sick of everything, want only oblivion.

Quite often, confronted with such situations, people told lies to remain in the good books of new acquaintances. A few months into marriage, however, and the truth about them is revealed. Nobody ever scored eighty or above. Hansel's score of seventy-eight out of a possible one hundred points, was considered very high, so high that Marion doubted the sincerity of the assessment chart. She did not betray her emotions about it but hoped to watch Hansel live it out. Nobody ever scored one hundred percent. He gave her a pleasant surprise. After six months she thought he was even better than he himself estimated.

Hansel proved to be a dream husband, the type of husband who cared for the daily lives of every member of the family, including close relatives. He was a very good

listener who weighed his opinion very well before delivering it. He had none of the weaknesses of which husbands were wantonly guilty. Many marriages were on the rocks because the man found his home invaded by in-laws. Hansel kept an open house and received his in-laws with the same cheerful spirit that he received his own relatives. If he thought an in-law deserved financial assistance he discussed it with his wife who sometimes cut down the amount he had earmarked for the visitor. His in-laws discussed their personal problems as though they were Hansel's family problems and they solved them together.

In many homes alcoholism was the bane. Hansel took nothing else but a small coke. Many marriages ran into early problems because husbands could not turn away from relationships they had built up with other girls before marriage. They spent long hours out of home, in beer bars and chicken parlours, leaving the women to take care of the homes and the children. Hansel was different. Although he had one lady, Salomey, residing secretly behind the famous JANNA SUPERMARKET at Nkwen, with whom he had something going (and here we are tempted to pardon him this one failing!), he went about it so discreetly that it did not affect his marital life. Four things occupied him: reading, tending his flowers and playing snooker or draughts at the club. He enjoyed doing all these to the accompaniment of some classical music. He had at least twenty-five different species of flowers, and he knew all by name.

The situation involved a strong element of self-deceit bordering on naiveté. In his prayers he begged God to forgive him that one failing which he argued was not a bad performance, judged by the 9-point grading scale. If he kept nine out of ten commandments and faltered in one only, he should score excellent, a distinction, *mention très bien avec félicitations du jury!* He generally met her during break in the day and on weekends. By the evening when women expected

men to be out drinking and chasing women, he was permanently at home reading, watching cartoons and other films with the children or telling them stories.

When Hansel married Marion he had worked in the bank for a little over two years. He was a most meticulous planner for whom one of the most important preoccupations in life was the welfare and the future of his children. At the beginning of every year he bought a diary into which he faithfully recorded the details of his everyday life and in December ended up with projections for the new year. Friends and relatives who had informed him about important events in their lives, birth of children, deaths and promotions, often came to him to confirm the dates. They knew he recorded everything. Joining the bank late in 1980 he had planned to work for 15 years, going on voluntary retirement by the year 2001. When he got married two years later and had a son that very year all his calculations were geared towards saving for the future of the boy and, as the other children came, he readjusted his programme accordingly, making sure that he provided for each. From a net salary of 450,000 francs, he made sure that he saved about 100,000 francs which he invested in various family meeting contributions groups. These small investments gave him about 800,000 francs every fifteen months.

At the level of the bank there was a compulsory savings programme, a monthly deduction of 10,000 francs which they called Providence Fund. This money was given to the worker at his retirement or whenever he resigned from the bank. By his fifteenth year as he had hoped, he would have about two million francs. There was also the lump sum of miscellaneous entitlements of 10 million francs which were described as pension benefits. In all, therefore, he had estimated that by the time his first child reached university going age, he would have at least fifteen million francs to his credit.

In 1993 he had saved regularly and sufficiently at the Credit Union to be able to obtain a loan of eight million francs with which he put up a comfortable six-bedroom house for his family. Marion found this move exceedingly pleasing, especially because Hansel achieved all of it without any prompting from her. This was quite unlike the case with many families in which the wives have to curse and plead and pressurise their husbands to get them to put up something for the families, just in case things turned bad and they found themselves unable to pay rents. This loan depleted his other savings and ate into his previous calculations, but with time, he hoped to make up. All these Marion approved of very sincerely. There were two guest rooms, two rooms for the children including a study, a very large master's bedroom.

In the front yard were two beautiful gardens in which he planted flowers of countless species. He loved flowers with a passion and whenever the weather was good and he was not going out you could hear him whistling among the flowers, his dog barking and capering round and round in amusement. He had flowers on his veranda, in the parlour and in his bedroom, which gave to the whole environment a very special aroma. At one corner of the compound he had two beehives from which he harvested honey every season.

Marion had only one problem with Hansel, his attitude towards his dog – King. It did not threaten their marriage, though, but it always made Marion feel very uncomfortable. Hansel seemed to show more concern for it than for human beings. He would argue: “You have to continue to show love to this dog even when things are rough because it cannot understand like a child. That’s why I can prefer to feed the dog and let the child starve. I can tell the child what I shall do for him tomorrow or the next week. For a dog it has not such understanding.”

And, based on that philosophy he stopped short of dressing the dog up and asking it to sit at the table with the rest of the family. Whenever he returned from work the first question after the greetings was:

“Has King had something to eat?”

If by some error Marion had forgotten the way she usually did, he would give all his food to the dog. And whenever the dog was not given food it had a way of barking which alerted Hansel to the fact, and he would respond immediately. Marion hated pets with all her soul. King was a huge dog, a crossbreed between a German shepherd and some foreign species. It was castrated. Standing on its hind legs, which it did quite often, it was much taller than Marion, and required twice as much food as any single individual in the house. It was ebony black with yellow glittering eyes and long pointed teeth that showed on the skin on the sides of its snout. It had wolf-like ears and a voice that could send fear down the spine of any intruder into the compound or a mere passer-by. It hated any other animal, cats, chickens and even other dogs which it could very easily tear to pieces, and at the sight of which it was so restless that it sometimes broke loose. It had a bushy tail and fur on its body that could compare favourably with the wool on an Australian sheep. Marion would love it very much for that if it did not eat so much, including her chickens, and if her husband did not give it so much attention.

Then there is the memorable episode concerning the dog which was very popular amongst tennis players, in the days when Hansel dabbled in the game. They were still in Kumba by then. He would jog to the tennis court with King whom he trained over the months to retrieve straying balls. The dog did very well chasing the balls and bringing them to the players. It was said that it performed better than the ball boys who usually claimed so much for their pay. But King had one problem, it was only interested in a ball that had

gone out of the court. If it picked a ball and in the process of bringing it another ball went out of the court, it dropped the one it was already bringing and went after the one that it had just seen bouncing off. Children always made a fool of the dog by throwing an old ball in its direction when it was returning with a ball it had retrieved.

There was another problem, a lot more serious and one that threatened his marriage: he would not go to church. The irony was that he loved reading bible stories to the children. He was so versed with the Bible that he could stand his own against any Jehovah Witness or preachers many of whom usually claimed omniscience in the word of God. He never told her or anybody else precisely why he had refused to go to church. When pressed he would simply say it was because of an incident that occurred in his childhood. He would not say what the incident was but he would also not flinch. Given her Roman Catholic upbringing, the idea of going to church lay closest to her heart and she felt her whole life unfulfilled if she could not get her husband to join her at mass on Sundays.

There were many people like him who did not go to church, but they always had a story or two to tell about the church that made them detest it. Hansel discouraged nobody. He kept his feelings to himself. This was another area in which Marion met with much disappointment, the fact that Hansel kept far too much to himself. He never uttered an angry word and you never knew whether he disapproved of an act or not because his mood was always the same. Very few things excited him. He was not a sad or gloomy person. He was simply introspective and severely well-ordered and methodical. He made sure that on Sundays he dropped off Marion and the kids at the church and then picked them up after Mass.

Communication usually began to break down on Saturday afternoons. It habitually began when she reminded him, and she never failed to do so, that the next day was Sunday.

“You will look so well, Hansel, but by tomorrow morning you would say you do not feel well enough to go to mass.”

“If I do not feel like going and my wife and children feel like going and I do not discourage them, what’s bad in that?”

“You must set a good example,” she would say. “These children would grow up thinking that the church is only for mothers and their children. You must show God that you care, that you are grateful for all that he has done for you...”

“I have told you that I pray to God. I have told you that not going to church is no indication that one doesn’t care about God. God doesn’t live in the church,” he would say.

“But you should go to church if only to communion, to socialise with others....”

“It is better to stay out of church and think of God, and pray to God than to Go to church because you want to socialise, because you want to communion with people.”

And he would not go to church. He would faithfully drop them off and it appeared Marion prayed very little and spent her time planning how to confront Hansel on his neglect of Mass. It told from the way she received him when he came to take them from the church. This was the only occasion in her life on which she observed him with a rising of the loathing she felt for all pagans, a loathing which was actually physical as the approach of some noisome and disgusting creature. When he picked the children up or when they met him at home they would drive off to NIRVANA, a veritable Paradise on earth, a hotel that was surrounded by the most beautiful flowers and plants on the outskirts of the town. It was owned and run by a botanist/horticulturist and it had very many things to attract and entertain children – swings, games and the like. The children always looked forward to Sunday after mass and if it happened that their father was late in coming for them they would scuttle home to meet him, leaving her behind.

Being the squeamish type that she was, Marion never accompanied them to NIRVANA. For one thing, ever since she was still a student, she knew that in addition to its unearthly beauty, NIRVANA was said to contain an element of the unethical, it had sleeping rooms into which men took women for sexual enjoyment. She was not wrong because in point of fact, and unknown to her, Hansel and his paramour Salomey had been there quite a few times when the heat was on. They would drop off a note at the JANNA SUPERMARKET counter for each other on how to take off for NIRVANA. The sales boy or salesgirl at JANNA, very polite as they always were, would transmit the notes and replies between them.

Chapter Five

One day at about noon a black Land Cruiser drove up to the kerb in front of the bank and stopped. Peeping from his window from the first floor, Hansel saw two men climb down and enter the building. They soon reappeared in front of the Bank Manager's office where they informed the security officer of their desire to talk to the manager. The security man went in and reported their presence. Presently the manager came to the door and ushered them in. One would have thought they were fleeing from the devastating rain that came down just as they were entering the main building housing the bank. For the past hour the weather had been terribly windy, files were thrown open and loose leaves blown off and scattered across the office. Sometimes the wind could blow and then subside without any rain. But this time, the rain came down even while the wind was still blowing. Curtains were blown through the windows and left suspending horizontally like tiny tents on invisible poles. Through the leafy branches of the pine trees it blew like a swarm of locusts.

There were three chairs in front of the Manager. The two men chose the two extremes and placed their bags in the middle chair. They proceeded to introduce themselves: One of them called himself Jean-Claude Atangana. He was a tall unsmiling middle-aged man with a face infested with wrinkles and pimples, a thin skinny neck and an ill-fitting charcoal grey suit. He had long fingers with nails that were brown at the tip, a strong indication that the man must be a heavy smoker. The other man, a head shorter, sturdily built,

very dark in complexion with reddish lips, almost Mongolian eyes and a head that had the shape of an inverted pear, was called Theophile Andre-Jules Meboka.

They both spoke like people who wielded a lot of authority in their lives, and you got the idea that they were people who were used to being instantly obeyed. They were not only members of the Central Committee but also from the Politburo. They both carried black leather brief cases which gave them a very business-like outlook. Each of the bags bore the Party emblem as well as the national flag. Their clothes were very carefully ironed, although they gave the impression that they must have been to the pressing not a few times only. They were both heavily perfumed. They were Franco-phones and even though they spoke such clean English, the French accent was unmistakable.

"I am pleased to meet you, sirs," the manager rose with some trepidation in his voice. "I feel flattered that members of the political bureau would be visiting a poor banker like myself. What can I do for you, sirs?"

The man called Theophile Andre-Jules Meboka spoke for them both, adjusting his tie to make his voice very clear:

"You know that the President has thrown open the campaigns for Presidential and Legislative elections."

His tone made it a question. The manager bit his lower lip for a while and he found himself unconsciously but nervously tapping his pen against his forehead

"It's been in the news," the manager said in a voice a little louder than he was used to because the rain was beating so hard against the windows that he needed to shout, being a man with a small voice. They all waited until they could hear each other without undue strain.

"So where does the bank come in, sir?"

"Well, let me know, what is the balance sheet of this bank."

"The balance sheet of the bank?" the manager was sure he didn't hear him correctly.

The man nodded.

"The assets of the bank, if you like," Jean-Claude put in with his deep sonorous voice. "The balance sheet."

The manager looked at both men and then asked:

"What for?" He had wanted to say the information was a bank secret, but he recalled that it was even available in the newspapers. He pulled out a file which he threw open with nervous fingers. He handed it over to the man and the two of them studied it for a long time and then Jean-Claude asked:

"How much of this can you make available to help the President's campaign team?"

"I don't get you, Mr. Jean-Claude. You mean me as an individual or what?"

"Your bank. One of the most urgent tasks incumbent on us is to ensure that the Party has enough in its coffers before embarking on the campaigns."

"If we must," the manager said exasperatingly, "then it is the board to decide. What you see here is share capital investment. It is people's money, it is not profit... I am indeed surprised that I even have to point this out to you. Every single franc leaving the coffers has to be accounted for. Otherwise I place my job on the line, and the future of the bank. Otherwise I defeat the purpose of this institution, which is to protect people's monies and to make it available at any time that they need it. The bank's own profit is the little overhead charges of interest that we impose for protecting the money. "

"Mr. Director, the Party knows all that," Theophile said unbendingly. "Where the Party is concerned, the fate of an individual customer or customers should not really matter. With time the bank will generate enough profit to offset that generous donation. As for your position, it will be a

greater risk for anybody to try to bother you because you lent the state a helping hand. When you do this kind of thing we are requesting from you, you have the protection of the State whenever you are in trouble.”

The man dialled his head office and reported the matter to his General Manager. The General Manager did not reply at once. There was a long silence during which the branch manager concluded that the general manager must be consulting somebody else.

“I will call you back,” the General Manager said wearily after that long interval. The two Politburo men sat discreetly silent. Then the General Manager called back as he had promised.

“Use your discretion,” he told the branch manager.

“We give you 500,000 francs,” the manager told the two men. “At least such an amount cannot hurt the bank seriously. It would be put under the profit and loss account.”

“You don’t understand, Mr. Director,” Jean-Claude said, fixing the man with a threatening eye. “That cannot fuel our car for even one day.” He gave the manager enough time to reconsider what looked now like a ridiculous offer. He stopped short of saying that the manager’s offer was an insult to the Party and the Head of State. But the thought hung in the air. The manager seemed to understand him with instant intuition.

“We make it two million,” the manager said. Surely this was a much more impressive figure. But, apparently, the men were out for something really outrageous.

“The Presidential campaign is not child’s play,” said Theophile. “If every bank gave only two million, the Head of State would postpone or even cancel the elections and even declare himself President for life.”

“Which is what he already is,” the manager said to himself as he reflected on the adjective *only*, which the man had employed.

"Two million francs cannot be described as *only*, Mr. Theophile," he pointed out. Going back to the idea of the Head of State declaring himself President for life Jean-Claude interjected:

"God forbid bad things, the financial institutions should come to his rescue, every single one."

The manager was now a thoroughly perplexed man. Out of that element of perplexity he enquired preposterously: "What are the other banks saying?"

This implied that he was about to make a major concession but just needed some external force to push him to the point of decision.

"That is confidential," Theophile told him. "But since you insist, if it will make you take our mission seriously..." Theophile pulled out a document from his leather bag, shielded the upper section with another piece of paper and showed him a figure.

"That's what A.B & C has offered to the Party for campaigns," the man said.

"Two milliard!"

The two men nodded.

"And that's for a bank that has not been around for as long as you."

The manager shook his head sadly, his face transforming instantly into a mass of anger, disappointment and bitterness. The mouth curled, his heavy brows, dyed black but with speckles of grey, contracted to form a thick line over his glinting eyes. He again phoned his headquarters. Again the General Manager threw the matter back to him. "I knew it would be our turn any time," he said. "Looks to me as if their intention is to kill this bank too."

"The advantage of helping the state in such times of need is that you wouldn't have to worry about taxes for a long, long time to come," Theophile put in superfluously, assuming an air of seriousness. There was a grimly disdainful smile at the corners of his serious-parted lips.

The manager was besides himself with worry. How can a group of people in a power position act with so much unconcern. How could they want so much of the monies people have suffered so much to save, and without any guarantee that the money would be paid back. Where did they expect the bank to find the money to be able to satisfy its customers?

“When the bank is no more who would worry about taxes?” the manager said to himself.

Quite predictably, though painfully, one month after the men from the Politburo visited the Bank, Hansel received the following heart-breaking letter:

CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Mr. Bolingo

Due to circumstances beyond our control, the deteriorating financial situation of the bank compels us to cut down on our staff until such a time that we shall have picked up again. We are by this note, therefore, and with a very heavy heart, informing you that your services would no longer be needed...

It was signed by the General Manager. When the branch manager gave him the letter he expected Hansel to burst out shouting and cursing. But as his nature was, Hansel read the letter over and over, reflected for a few minutes and then rising with a weary sigh he remarked: “If the bank no longer needs the services of an accountant, whose services could they need? They could as well close shop.” He held the letter clenched between his thumb and index finger and seemed to be fanning himself gently with it.

“It beats my imagination,” the manager said noncommittally. He was about to say something else when Hansel walked out shutting the door firmly behind him. He was to learn that apart from the branch manager himself,

every other worker had been served the same kind of letter. The very next week the doors of the bank were sealed amidst outcries and protests from customers who now could not get out a franc of the millions they had saved. The tragedy was that there were the treasurers of several small organizations which had saved the contributions to be shared out at the end of the year. The end of year was three months hence, but nothing was being said to them.

To cap the scandal, one of the members from the Politburo, who visited the bank with the bad news, Theophile, was appointed the liquidator. He was placed on a monthly emolument of five million francs. Recovery Committees were set up and they immediately went to work. Everybody owing the bank was to make good his debt within seven days or face the bailiffs who now worked overtime. Customers had only a few weeks to repay, who at the time of accepting the loan had signed that they would repay in one year, two, three or five. The bank was in trouble and could not wait for the dates originally agreed upon. As could be expected, many debtors could not meet the deadline. Bailiffs were called in and their property auctioned to save the bank. The result in terms of what was actually recovered was dismally disproportionate to the anger it had generated amongst the customers. The bank continued to sink lower and lower.

All the workers were asked to compile one unnecessary dossier after the other in order to enable the liquidator calculate their pension benefits, Providence Fund and other benefits in readiness for payment. Dossier after dossier was compiled, complicating an already potentially explosive situation. The government's reaction or rather the Party's reaction was to send Gendarmes and policemen to guard the bank and the liquidator's house.

Three of the former employees of the Bank died of hypertension and one died of heart attack. Hansel did not die, but his life suddenly took a downward plunge. He had not even paid up to half of the loan from the Credit Union, and he still had seven years to go for his voluntary retirement. He had no other collateral with which to contract another loan. Besides, since he was without a job he had lost his major bargaining power. Previously whenever he sat with the children, to spur them on, he would promise to send anybody to the best university abroad, whether to Germany, Britain or America.

His children had been put in the best colleges and promised the best education if they passed their examinations, were doing very well. Now no matter how he readjusted his spending power, he could not make ends meet. Casual promises he made in the bright days came back to haunt him

"I will work and send mummy and daddy money every week through Western Union," Philemon would promise.

"I will study, work and send my mum a car to the port in Douala," Perdita would say. Philemon was already thirteen, topping his class in Sasse College. He was in form four and would be writing the G.C.E. Ordinary Level the next year. He kept reminding his father of his promise. He would fulfil his own side of the bargain by making ten subjects at the G.C.E. O Level and would go to the High School and pass five subjects with very good grades. Henry would do even better at the ordinary level and would also enter the High School, and at their different levels, the other kids would excel. But there would be no means of sending them ahead. He could not raise the kind of money required for a bank statement to be issued, with the help of which his child could be given a visa to travel to Britain or America to study. Hansel stood accused, ashamed.

On the day he received his dismissal letter something happened that alarmed everybody in the house even before they learned of what had happened to him. He came home holding only one parcel in his left hand, it was the dog's bones. There was no bread! He knew how the bread idea would disturb the children, but he knew henceforth life was going to be really tough, at least until he got his pension benefits and Grand Duty, if ever. The children should already be made to get used to not having bread for breakfast. As soon as he got home he summoned Marion and showed her the letter.

"When something like this happens, what happens to your pension benefits, your insurance scheme and Providence Fund?"

"I cannot tell you anything about that," he said. "Nobody seems to know what will happen and what we should do."

"You are not thinking of suing them or something?"

"It is the government you are talking about. When you sue the government it is the government that issues the verdict. Where tigers are judges the goats never win."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Take a rest for a couple of days and then sit up to redraw my plans."

It was Perdita who first drew attention to the fact that there was no bread.

"Daddy, you forgot bread?"

"No bread, my daughter, no bread," he said, feeling the pinch of the dismissal.

"Why? But you brought the dog's bones."

"Yes, dear I brought the dogs bones because it cannot understand my situation the way you can when it is explained to you. Its duty is to eat and protect the compound. Do you know how many times we would have been robbed in this house if we didn't have King guarding us?"

“You say the dog cannot understand your situation, understand what situation? What is wrong?”

“The situation is that I have been laid off from the bank,” he began softly. The little girl reflected for a while and as soon as her mother came in she announced:

“Daddy has been laid off. What does laid off mean, Mummy?”

“It means that he will not go to work again, and he will not be paid again.”

“Why did they *laid* him off from the bank?”

“You say ‘why did they LAY him off,’ Marion corrected the child. She repeated her question, this time correctly.

“They have closed the bank,” Hansel began.

“They who?” the other children joined in.

“The government. It is government action.”

“What did the bank do that the government closed it?”

“The bank gave out more money than it had to pay off its own debts especially to staff like us.”

“They gave out the money to who? Why did the bank give the money when they knew that they would run into trouble?” Henry enquired pertinently.

“It was the government that took the money...”

“When they pay the money back the bank will open again and you will continue to work again, and you will continue to buy bread everyday, not so daddy?” Perdita asked her last question on the issue. Even before she finished Henry had started wondering aloud:

“But the government is supposed to have so much money why would they...”

Hansel waved to the boy to stop. The questions, coming at that material time, were stressing him very much.

Overwhelmed by humiliating despair and tortured to the point of insanity by the unbearable weight of his abject poverty and obdurate pride in the strength of his convictions, Hansel refused to remain idle. In league with a

friend he set up a small consultancy which they called *Motombo and Bros Associates*. Its activities involved helping people applying for financial assistance to draw up projects. There were very many people who still remembered how well he had served them while working as an accountant with the bank. These people made sure that he did not starve to death. They gave him small contracts. His small company also did minor auditing in the small financial institutions. They made supplies to certain government offices - stationery, office machines and the like. They were also capable of furnishing offices. From these meagre earnings he was able to keep his head afloat. But this was scant consolation for a man who had mapped out grandiose programmes for himself and for his children. His debts mounted, his circle of relationships grew narrower and narrower.

During this most trying period it was Salomey who took real care of him. Upon the confident assumption that things would get better some day, she got herself into numerous debts to keep him going. The worst was the sum of 500,000 francs which he encouraged her to get from a money-lender (he was not so well known as to convince a money-lender to give him money). Prior to asking her to go in for the money a longstanding rumour finally materialised. All the former workers were asked to report at the bank with their ID cards at the end of the month. This was sure proof that the money was ready. They all did report, but returned empty-handed. They made several appearances and then the liquidator began to behave funny. On one occasion he asked for death certificates from proxies while asking for "live" certificates from those who were alive. The due date came and passed, the money-lender was on Salomey's neck. She brought in a bailiff and they took away her furniture. She was a woman of taste, and what they took away was a treasure. It bothered him like a pebble in his shoe to think that he was the one to bring Salomey so much misery.

Chapter Six

Since they had extended landed property (two coffee farms at Barombi Kang, a large cocoa farm at Kake III and another large farm near the railway terminal, the crisis would have been vastly mitigated if he went up to his father and explained and convinced him and he agreed and sold some of his lands to give him money to protect him from total collapse. But all attempts to get his father to sell part of their land in Kumba failed. Instead, and to his chagrin, the old man's persistent advice was that, should he be no more, no portion of the land should ever be sold. At the very worst it could be rented out.

For very many years long before Hansel's termination from the bank, the old man had been suffering from a mild stroke. Then with his age (he was over eighty then) prostate cancer set in, rendering him more and more helpless. He, Hansel was not the old man's favourite son, and he knew it. That honour belonged to Sebastian, his third son, with whom he spent most of his time. Because they were generally together Sebastian came to know many of those secrets which a dying man can release only to a child he would like to succeed him.

The old man, or Ta'ata Bolingo, to give him his traditional title, regarded Hansel as too aloof, far too unconcerned with affairs of the family. He believed that Hansel thought of himself too rich and selfish for his liking and declined to ask him for any assistance. His pet accusation was that Hansel never betrayed any sense of urgency. He took his time, always, irrespective of the pressures of the moment.

Whenever he came to see his father he allowed the man to air his problems and then he told them why he had come down and then left. Sometimes he would leave money, but quite often he didn't. No matter how serious the problems narrated by his father were thought to be, he never gave more than he had budgeted from the start to give him.

Besides, Ta'ata Bolingo had never forgiven Hansel for the disgrace he inflicted on the family following the abortive marriage to his tribe's girl, Gwendolyn. He bitterly detested the idea that Hansel was married to somebody from outside the tribe. He made no secret about his anger and Marion knew that her father-in-law held her in very great disfavour. Nothing that she did pleased him. Once when he visited them she spent over an hour preparing a meal that she thought befitted the man's position as the father of a banker. When the table was set and the old man invited, she overheard the man talking almost to himself:

"Tomato, *shaaaah*," (he was mimicking the sound of the frying pan!), "fish, *shaaaah*, meat, *shaaaah*, chicken, *shaaaah*, everything *shaaaaaaah*. Wububububhi!" he put his hands over his lips and shouted. "How can my son save money to send to me with this kind of senseless extravagance?"

Marion was very sad to see how her efforts to impress the old man had been interpreted for extravagance. There was always too much salt or too little. And when she put salt on a saucer which she placed for him to serve himself, she was dismissed as a poor cook who could not estimate the right quantity of ingredients she put in her sauce. He himself was not terribly knowledgeable in cooking matters and once preferred Vaseline oil to all those PAMOL oils. In the end she gave up trying to please the man. This explained one reason he continuously refused to go to live with Hansel and receive treatment. Hansel felt very uncomfortable about it because even while his father was alive, he and his wife were already carving out portions of the farmland for themselves.

He decided that Marion and himself should pay a brief but all important visit to the family in Kumba. Ideas began to float in Hansel's confused and desperate mind. Finally, his mind was made up. To get himself out of the financial morass he must get himself into the leadership position in the family. When his father lay helplessly ill, he caused the old man to be transferred to the Bamenda General Hospital where he claimed there would be a solution to the prostate. His junior brothers yielded but the strain of the journey aggravated his condition and he died within one day of his arrival in Bamenda.

Hansel took a decision which made everybody doubt his sanity. He decided that his father would be buried at the community cemetery in Bamenda, and stood by it. This was in gross violation of the tradition and everybody tried in vain to talk Hansel out of it. Pa Bolingo was a Ta'ata, a title holder in Akamanang-Ntang and people with that title are usually buried only in the sacred grove in the village. At their burial the masquerade was supposed to hold the hand of the successor on whom certain rites were to be performed before the Ta'ata's burial.

Hansel had other plans! Two weeks after the burial of his father in Bamenda, he took another ridiculous step. Accompanied by Marion he summoned the family to a meeting in his father's compound where he announced that he was now the Ta'ata, or the Prince, the traditional head of the family, the successor to his father's title. This was scandalous. In Sebastian's keeping were proofs of his claim to the title which the rest of the members of the family knew, including uncles and aunts. There was a picture in which Ta'ata Bolingo stood with Sebastian. The old man was pointing at Sebastian and handing over to him his buffalo horn. Sebastian was also keeping a leather parchment which the old man had given him, an obvious indication that he was the chosen successor. Finally, there

was an envelope containing all the documents relating to the lands they owned in Kumba. This too had been given to Sebastian in total confidence. Hansel ignored all these and declared himself Ta'ata. His argument was that on his dying bed his father had *whispered* something to him to the effect that he had left everything in his hands. His wife, Marion who seemed to have had enough of her father-in-law, admitted even without being asked that it was true that her father-in-law had bequeathed his property to Hansel.

How a mere *whisper* on a dying bed could be allowed to overturn all the proofs they had for the successor, they all wondered but were unable to rise and protest outright. Any protest that existed manifested itself in sighs and groans. Hansel was such an overwhelming personality that whenever he stood for a thing he invariably got it. His slow, quiet but forceful way of talking generally cowered all opposition, until perhaps long after he has had his request granted. He hardly interrupted anybody whenever he or she was talking, no matter how much nonsense was involved. He generally spoke as if he had given the matter such deep thought that his might only be the best thing to be done. To disagree with him openly usually sounded like disagreeing with good sense. After the declaration when Michael tried to express his disappointment at what had just transpired, Sebastian shouted him down.

"You sat there when they were seizing my title from me, and you said nothing, only exchanging eyes. Now you are trying to show me how angry you can be. Why did you not stand up and say "no"? Don't you know that everybody would have risen with you against it?"

"When I saw that you were not saying anything, I thought you did not mind, so I also kept quiet." Whatever the degree of their indignation, the title had naively been allowed to pass to somebody who, it seemed, might put it into immediate use.

Chapter Seven

On a very damp and rainy day ten days after they returned from Kumba a letter came into Hansel's possession which changed his life for good. He had been offered a very lucrative International Job with a very rich Chinese company. The first person he thought of disclosing the secret to was not Marion, his wife, but Salomey, his girl friend. He braved the deluge that still raged on since dawn and drove out. Surprisingly, the rain gradually reduced in intensity until it was a mere drizzle by the time he arrived Salomey's house. He knew she would be in, what with the rains. He parked his car in front of the JANNA SUPERMARKET, and walked to the house. When he arrived she had long returned from work, cooked and fed the children and also had a good rest.

"This rain seems to be scared of you," Salomey remarked. "We have not had a breathing space since morning. The dresses I washed since yesterday are still piled up in the room. Very soon mildew will attack them."

"Mildew cannot touch you. Is it not scared of me too?" He went on to enquire: "So how was the day, sa?" he greeted. Between them they addressed themselves "sa" in the phone and in notes.

"Not bad," she said.

When Hansel came in, as his nature was, you couldn't tell whether he had any exciting news or not. She said nothing else. In Hansel's presence, you would have to do all the talking while he showed that he was listening by uttering short monosyllabic answers. He was a very good listener. Salomey was used to his cool, calm and unexcited way of going about his things.

She brought him his usual drink, a small coke and he himself asked for some roasted maize to go with it. The two boys, Leonard and Bernard were engrossed in their TV cartoon programme, Bugs Bunny and Friends. After he had eaten the maize he filled his glass and served Salomey.

“Cheers!” he said and after a sip he put his glass on the side stool to his left.

“Come and actually sit here,” he told Salomey, pointing to the arm of his chair.

Salomey promptly did.

“I have come and sat,” she told him.

Hansel smiled and placed his left hand on Salomey’s. With his right he pulled out a long khaki envelope from the left breast pocket which he held out to her.

For a brief second, Salomey was frightened.

“What’s it?” she asked nervously. She instantly recalled the day she brought a letter to Hansel announcing the end of their relationship during her abortive marriage arrangement years ago.

“Read it,” he said. “Don’t panic. It is good news,” he entreated her.

She studied the stamp, weighed the letter and then flipped it open and read.

Hansel was pulling at a stray strand of hair below his Adam’s apple which stood like some fruit that was stuck in his throat. He was looking round the building for which he had provided much of the furniture and which he hoped to change as soon as he returned from Bangui. There were three bedrooms, one for the kids, one for visitors and the third for Salomey herself. There was a large sitting area cut off from the dining section by a large cabinet. Actually they were two identical cabinets, one placed on top of the other, so meticulously designed that it was easy to conclude that it was one gigantic piece. Each of the two main sectors had four compartments. The compartments above were

completely sealed and could be opened and locked with keys. The middle compartments of the lower sector were covered with transparent glass. They were also keyed, although one could clearly see the array of chinaware and cutlery. The left section was a display box with a wide variety of collectables, memorabilia, sea shells, corals as well as volcanic rocks.

There were four very large speakers at different angles in the sitting area. She usually operated the music from her room. There was a visible similarity in the carpentry and wood between the dining and sitting room. The dining table and the chairs were made of mahogany varnished black to look like ebony. The cushion chairs in the sitting room were of the same make, so also were the side stools. The dining section was adorned with a thin, wall-to-wall Persian rug (actually two rugs artfully sewed together), while the centre of the sitting area bore a blue, red and yellow Moroccan rug. A shallow wood rack for magazines and pamphlets stood near the central table, a very low structure made of the same mahogany as the chairs. Beautiful brown curtains rounded off the serenity and sombreness of the house.

On the walls hung many pictures. There were pictures of her father, mother, herself and the kids. Near the magazine rack stood a very large globe showing all the continents. There was a handle on the top, striding the North Pole. When you pulled the handle the globe split into two and you were introduced to a wine storage device in which there was always Martini, Campari, whiskey and gin. With time this house would look even more impressive, he thought.

Salomey read the letter over and over again:

*The Personnel and Recruitment Department
Chamber of Commerce for Chinese Overseas
Industries.*

079569 – B, Open Apple Boulevard

Hong Kong 22879112

Republic of China.

August 15th, 2001.

To Mr. Hansel Bolingo Motombo;

Motombo and Bros Associates

P.O. Box 985

Bamenda, North West Province

CAMEROON

Dear Mr. Bolingo Hansel;

**RE: APPOINTMENT LETTER AS
REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE OF
CRABS INTERNATIONAL**

Forgive us the delay in getting back to you. Owing to the sensitive nature of the job at hand we had to crosscheck some vital pieces of information, and one of your references took rather long to get to us. However, sparing you the suspense, the good news is that you stood out tall amongst the numerous applicants. We must congratulate you for this and can only wish you well on the new job.

As indicated in the advertisement for the post, your beginning salary is about 2million francs. You will have an advance salary for 3 months to enable you take off.

You will personally have to report with the original copy of this letter to the Head Office

CRABS AND SHELLS INTERNATIONAL
AVENUE DES GRANDES AMBITIONS
1561, BANGUI
REPUBLIC OF CENTRAL AFRICA.

The man to talk to is Mr. Lee Ping Yung, who will finalize everything including a detailed job prescription. His cell phone numbers are 9987654 or 7272851. E-mail: Lepingyu@yahoo.fr.com.

*If you have any questions to ask, we are open. Respectfully,
Kanakimai Suini Singh
P.M.
Kasuisuin@sin.fr.com.*

Then she rose and came and fell on him, encumbering him with nervous kisses and tears of joy. There was such abandon in her action that she forgot about the presence of the children.

“When did you get this?” she asked, excitement written all over her visage.

“This morning.”

“And you just brought it like that?”

“What do you mean? I should have hired a brass band to lead me here?”

“Something like that would not be out of place,” she said, besides herself with excitement. “The news is so good that even the weather has suddenly brightened up. When did all this begin?”

“About a year ago,” Hansel said, bubbling with pride at the his own handiwork. “I first picked it up in the internet, in fact, a friend drew my attention to it in the internet. I didn’t take them serious at first, but I made sure that I sent them my complete CV along with very important references. And here we are. I always told you that your miracle was on the way...”

“Now I believe you,” she nodded. And then she said: “I believe this Sunday you must go to church...”

“Why?”

“To thank God for this good fortune...”

“You think God doesn’t know?”

“I know he does, but ...”

“If God were not on our side, I wouldn’t come by such luck.”

“O.K., Hansel, stand up let’s offer a brief prayer.”

They rose and she prayed for them both:

“Gracious Lord in Heaven, Maker of Heaven and earth, we stand before you this evening with hearts full of infinite gladness for the light of hope which you have deemed necessary to introduce into this otherwise dark tunnel of our lives. We pray, o Lord, that this new opportunity, this key to happiness which your child my friend Hansel has been offered, should strengthen rather than strain his relationship with those who love him and those whom he loves. Let him o Lord, not be spoilt by wealth and success but remain the good old boy, father and friend that he has always been. Draw him nearer to you O’ Lord, especially on Sundays, that he may socialize and communion with the rest of your children. We ask all this in the mighty name of Jesus...”

“A-m—e- n,” they both concluded. As they sat down Hansel said: I will tell you a story. Once upon a time a little boy who was expecting his birthday the next day sat in the room next to his parents and started praying to their hearing:

‘Papa God, tomorrow is my birth day. I pray that tomorrow my mother and my father should buy me a bicycle for my birth day present. The next day before 10 o’clock the father had already bought him a bicycle.’”

They both laughed and then Hansel told her, “although you were praying to God, I now know what you want from me. I will do my best to comply. But remember this, my dear, Chilon of Sparta, one of the Seven Sages of Greece said: ‘Man, know thyself.’”

Chapter Eight

Now that we are talking about God and church, Prince, tell me, what do you really have against the church? You talk so well about the scriptures and about God. But you refuse to listen to anything concerning the church.”

She wouldn’t understand, Hansel thought. Childhood impressions last for ever. Even as he listened to her plea, the image of the young man dissolved before his mind’s eye and in its stead strode forth the bearded mystic of his boyhood days – Caseley-Hayford or simply Casford, Lord Casford, Jesus of Akamanang-Ntang. Speaking through a tangled nest of beard that completely hid his mouth, he would say with great pride:

“I am a free born of Sierra Leone.”

He was indeed that. He was a sailor. Some fifteen years ago his ship had pulled in at the port in Bata, Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. They had gone on land for a drink, had got drunk and had been abandoned by the ship. After a spate of mutual recriminations a fight had broken out in which he had wounded his pal mortally. How he found himself in Akamanang-Ntang he could scarcely recall. Because he was being hunted for murder he escaped into the forest, going and going aimlessly, halting at tiny villages only to eat and drink, then moving on and on until he reached Akamanang-Ntang which he considered an ideal hideout for a man like himself on the run.

He was talking and fanning himself with a piece of plywood because it was hot and he was perspiring in his down-reaching threadbare monk’s outfit, complete with

hood. And then he stopped fanning himself and looked round. The palaver house was already full of old men, young girls and naked boys, all waiting with great anticipation.

Lord Casford threw down the fan, clapped his hands together high above his head to show that they were bare, and then closed them tightly. When he threw them open, and to the delight of everybody, a swallow dived out and flew to the roof of the hut. He held his hand and beckoned to the swallow, it flew back into his palm which he swung round and round and when he placed his hands on the bare ground the swallow had become an egg. He threw the egg into the air and then held a bowl in the air as if to catch the egg in it. Grains of peanuts filled the bowl which he distributed to the children who ate with relish.

Lord Casford was performing in full gear on that particular day when it was announced that a catholic priest had come to see him. The white man was accompanied by some fifteen natives, most of them from the neighbouring village. The priest had heard of a certain heretic who was performing wonders at Akamanang-Ntang, but had never set eyes on him. Good thing he came and met him on a day when he was at the height of his magical powers.

Lord Casford performed one last act before climbing down from his dais to confront his foe. He palmed a handkerchief, swung his hand round and it became a plate.

“Who are you?” the priest enquired.

“I should be asking who you are,” Casford said.

“I am Stampfel, father Stampfel,” the priest said.

“I am Caseley-Hayford,” Jesus said, “Lord Casford.”

“Jesus of...” one of his fans threw in. A faint smile played at the corners of his mouth and then Casford said, “they also call me Jesus of Akamanang-Ntang.”

The priest tried in vain to conceal his mirth as he found Casford also bursting with amusement.

“We hear you perform miracles.”

"Thy own eyes have seen it," Casford said.

"I have seen nothing," the priest said.

Casford palmed a two headed snake which circled the priest twice, almost knocking him down with fright. Then he turned the snake into a walking stick and finally into a black wand which he held under his armpit. The old men crackled with laughter, the children screamed with excitement.

"These are no miracles," the priest said. "This is black magic."

"We call them miracles here," Casford said.

"I hear you claim to raise people from the dead," the priest said.

"Yes," one of the tribesmen concurred waving a piece of paper in the air. The priest asked to look at the piece of paper. Yes, he thought, it was as he had been told. It was a list of some twenty five names, ten women and fifteen men. They were names Casford was said to have copied from the community cemetery in the outskirts of the town, some ten kilometres from the village where they were. They were names of people Lord Casford had announced he would raise from the dead in seven days. In the beginning people dismissed it as a joke, but as the days went by and there was so much talk about it, a certain nervousness began to enter the minds of people, especially those who had lost some of the people he claimed he would bring back to life.

Those who were particularly disturbed were widows and widowers who had remarried, heirs, businessmen who didn't cherish the prospect of competitors returning to life to plague them as of old. Even unknown to him was the fact that the presence of father Damian's name on the list of those to be resurrected caused a great stir in the Catholic Church. Even if it was a joke, it was in very bad taste because when father Damian died of an alleged fire accident, there was so much talk about it. There were very many who thought (and had not yet forgotten), that he had been drugged before setting the house on fire.

The Presbyterian Mission also had its worry. Madam Lerindis Adamafo whose name featured on Casford's list was widely said to have been poisoned by her house girl with the complicity of her husband, Pastor Boona who married the girl soon after the woman's funeral. In the Rural Council office the list stepped on the toes of the Chairman of the council who was being blamed for the death of Mr. Claude Ngam who was his only challenger for the office which he eventually won. Although everybody was sceptical and there were many who said that the story that the wretch had developed the extraordinary powers of bringing back to life all those who had died within the last twenty years, was a fluke. But there was so much talk being made about it that the mayor was alerted, so also was the police commissioner. Unperturbed by all attempts to dissuade him, Casford continued to distribute the list of names all over the small town. As the days drew nearer and he was still as determined as ever to bring the dead back to life, it was decided that he must be restrained, by force, if necessary, to give up his resurrectionary intentions. What was even more disturbing was the quietly determined manner in which Casford continued to talk about it.

That was one reason why Father Stampfel had come.

"To which church do you belong?" he asked Casford.

"I do not belong to any church," the man said.

"Then why do you go about confusing these innocent natives?"

"I confuse nobody," Casford said. "I do not talk to them about any church. First of all I do not belong to any church. I teach them about God, I try to inculcate in them the principles of good neighbourliness, peaceful coexistence. The natives are my brothers, they have absolute faith in me, and I do not flatter myself in saying that my influence is felt over hundreds of kilometres of this place. They consult me whenever they need to appoint a chief, all

transactions between villages require my approval. My decision is accepted with touching confidence. I can say my power is greater than that of the chiefs, they admire and respect me.

"I am no heretic, I do not confuse anybody. I only help or try to help them in my own small way. See the way this place looks now, you wouldn't think a place in the jungle of Africa can be so neat. I simply tried to transfer the habits of cleanliness which I grew up with in Sierra Leone to this village. I taught them to construct cesspits and succeeded in discouraging them from separating the old and feeble and leaving them to die of starvation. I caused them to sweep their compounds, to keep the cooking pots away from dust. As a result, sickness has greatly reduced. The small ill-tended gardens that had yielded barely enough for immediate needs have, with time, been enlarged, drained and weeded, and surplus crops can now be stored against the future. So, Father, you see that I am not here to preach any church doctrine. I am here to help the natives improve on their lot."

The people who had been nodding and listening with wrapped attention and sympathy applauded his exposition. Father Stampfel seemed to be thinking about something else.

"That sounds interesting," he said. "Keep up the faith. But back to that your seven days wonder, how serious do you mean the threat to be taken?"

"Father, it is not an idle threat. It is a promise. It is something I plan to do and there is no doubt in my mind that I shall raise all these people..."

"And after you have raised them," Father Stampfel pressed on, "what happens next?"

"That I cannot say. Each of them may have a story to tell those who are still living. Whatever they would say, it is not for me to guess. My duty is simply to give them a second chance...."

“Will they be coming to stay alive or after their speeches they would die again?”

Casford smiled broadly and said: “Father, let’s wait for that day, it is only in a few days.”

Father Stampfel reported back to the parish and news of his findings was immediately transmitted to all those who stood to be disturbed by his resurrectionary feat. Casely-Hayford was summoned to recant his doctrine before a committee or face imprisonment. Casford wouldn’t recant. He said it was too late. But he made a suggestion: if they gave him a document signed by the Commissioner of Police and countersigned by the lord Mayor authenticating his powers to raise people from the dead, and if they gave him the sum of one million francs, he would leave town along with his powers without disturbing any dead person.

The money was made available to him and so also was the document authenticating his supernatural powers. But one day before the D-day, Lord Casford, Jesus of Akamanang-Ntang, was found dead in his hut, strangled. Neither the money nor the signed document could be found. All fingers pointed at the church. The death of Casford touched everyone in the village so badly that for very many years people from his village refused to have anything to do with the church, an institution which, as they saw it, paid more attention to dogma than to good deeds.

Childhood memories are indelible, Hansel thought. He still hated the church as he did when they learned that members of the church had a hand in the killing of Lord Casford.

Chapter Nine

For your sake, Salomey, I will review my stand. Consider me a church-goer as from next Sunday, for your sake. If ever there's anybody to make me change my mind on anything, it's you. So Church, here I come. Where do you go for worship?"

"At the Roundabout."

"There are a few things you will have to put me through since it is going to be my first time after so many years..."

"You were not going to church in college?"

"Of course we all did, but that's like washing clothes and clearing our portions every Saturday. After graduation we left all that behind. We were attending because there was ready punishment for anybody who was caught playing the truant."

"You should as well have left the interest in books which you cultivated while there. At least I know that when you missed classes you were equally punished. Anyway, what did you want to know?"

"Where do I sit? Do men have their own sitting space separate from that of the women? In our old days they sat in different groups, things may have changed. How do I know where to sit?"

"Both men and women sit together, they mingle with each other. But there are areas where one sex dominates. When you enter the church I do not expect you to go and sit only by the choir because it will be all women. From there on the rest is observation and imitation. Just watch out. I shall be watching out for you."

“That brings me back exactly to one reason for not going to church. People talk about going to church so feverishly that you would think they have a rendez-vous with God, when they are only going there to meet or look out for friends!”

Hansel spent the whole night working out strategies for putting the letter of employment into real profitable use. In the morning he showed it to Marion.

“When did you receive it?” she asked.

“I got it last night, but I wanted to digest it so that by the time I am telling you I should also tell you what I planned to do.”

“So what do you plan to do? I do not believe what I am seeing, or hearing. It sounds as if I am reading about those fictitious stories of rags-to-riches.”

“I don’t suppose you are saying that we have been living in rags...”

“Not at all. I am merely comparing two things. This sudden success falls within such a category.”

“I think it does. My main problem now is to go to Bangui, to report for duty and let it go on record that I have started work. Thereafter I plan how to continue from there.”

Marion was truly very pleased with the news which she relayed to the children, first as a group and individually. What this meant, she told them, was that their future has automatically changed. Those who have already passed their exams would be going into the universities of their choice, abroad. Their father took over from there and had their educational plans mapped out. He immediately make contacts with friends and relatives in Britain and America, to whom he would send their CVs for consideration for admission into the universities. Each person was to choose his or her career.

The next day was Saturday. After lunch, Hansel asked Marion: "Is today Saturday?"

"It sure is. What do you have to do? Tomorrow is Sunday too," she added tongue-in-cheek. She had long got used to him staying at home on Sundays, so she just mentioned it for a laugh."

"That's precisely why I am asking. I want to go to church tomorrow."

Marion thought she had not heard him well.

"Yes, I mean it," he said. "You have persuaded me for too long. I know it is late, but better late than never."

"That makes me feel happier and happier," Marion said. "Perhaps I am going to die soon..."

"Why do you say so?"

"Too many good things are happening to me recently. Your good job, the children's future, and now your change of heart to go to church. I will pray for you, daddy."

"What time is the mass?"

"First mass is at 6, they close at 7.30. The second mass which we attend starts at 9.30 and ends at 11 or so. Which one would you want to attend?"

"We go together at 9.30."

"Daddy, let it not be a joke, I hope..."

"Do I joke about such things?"

And he kept his word. By 9.30 he had dressed up and was waiting for everybody else. Marion had informed the children about it and they were very happy to have their father join them at mass that day. Marion suggested they all sit together as one family. That was very acceptable to Hansel who would be guided in case he was running into trouble following the liturgy.

Hansel did exactly what he had condemned in many church-goers: he did not concentrate on the Godliness of the church. His mind wandered from one item to the other. First he marvelled at the obviously expensive nature of the

structure, the tiles, the ceiling and the carvings. The church must be making a hell of money, he concluded. But he was scandalised to see small baskets going round, asking for alms. He noticed that everybody was putting in something. He dipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a number of thousand franc notes which he distributed to his children to put in the basket. Marion saw him giving the money to Philemon and enquired the reason. When he told her she took the money and gave them a hundred francs each. Later on she would say that kind of money drew too much attention to them, something she disliked very much. He saw something wrong with many of the activities.

Father Krustchek, a pole, spoke far too indistinctly during the gospel. He was not naturally a loud speaker, but even though there was a microphone in front of him, he consistently walked away from it or turned his mouth away from it, mumbling to himself. In the end everybody was very relieved when he returned to the microphone and said "Amen," crossing himself. The congregation answered in unison and loudly, A-m-e-n," without having heard a word of what he had been saying.

During communion which he initially threatened to take he was surprised to see two women, Reverend Sisters, partaking in the distribution. In their days it was unheard-of that a female should stand on the altar with a priest for reasons other than confession. The sight of the two women further gave him the impression that there must be something wrong with the way the church admitted women into the sisterhood. Ever since he was a young man, it was said that ugly women could not be admitted because it would seem that they took to sisterhood because they could not find anybody to marry them. In the same way, they knew that sexually impotent men could not be admitted into the priesthood. The two women handling the chalice and dishing out the Eucharist to Christians could never have found any

husbands anywhere. They were short and round in a distasteful way, and their faces infested with pimples and boils or some repulsive skin disease. One of them had squinted eyes and, when they had finished and were returning to the altar to hand over the remaining Eucharist to the officiating priest, Hansel noticed that one of them walked with a limp.

“Who qualifies for it?” he asked Philemon softly.

“Only those who are baptised,” the boy said.

“But how would they know I am not baptised if I go there for it?”

The boy smiled and remained silent. Another thing shocked him: the Eucharist was placed on people’s palms rather than on the tongue of some people. That again was scandalous in their days. The only person to touch it was the consecrated mediator between God and man, the priest. You would bleed to death if the Eucharist missed touching your tongue.

Hansel noticed a portion of the liturgy in which a person from the congregation rose to the pulpit and read something from the Bible and other sources and then asked the rest to pray for various persons, from the Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, right down to their humble selves. Hansel thought the persons leading this session were simply rattling words because the time between “Let us pray for our private intentions” and “We pray to the Lord” was far too short. He had hoped to tell God that he was sorry to have come to church under the present circumstances rather than a convictional change of heart, and had barely said a few silent words when the end of the prayers was decreed and he left it at that. A good prayer takes time and planning, it is not a question of holding your head down when the command is given and waiting for the magic word, “Amen,” and then rising and making a quick sign of the cross.

And then there was this part of the handshake, when the priest enjoined them to offer each other a handshake of love, many people did not do it from their heart, he noticed. They simply showed their hands around, touching others and just passing. Others did not just bother themselves standing up to be greeted or to greet. For a man like Hansel whose handshake was usually a warm, gripping clasp, it looked odd for a greeting. Immediately after he shook hands he buried his head in his hands, chuckling to himself until his eye watered. The scene in church reminded him of another incident which was narrated to them several years before.

A wild rumour had spread to the effect that there were a number of people engaged in some juju activity whose target was the male genitals. If you shook hands with any of such persons your genitals disappeared. Nobody ever saw somebody who had suffered the loss but the stories were so rampant that people no longer greeted by shaking hands. On a certain Sunday when the moment of shaking hands came, people only turned and looked each other in the face, nobody anxious to lose his genitals, even if it was for the sake of carrying out the wishes of God's mediator. Apparently, the officiating priest had not heard of the rumour and so was stunned by the action of the congregation. With the people still standing, it was said that the priest invited the catechist to find out what was happening. The old man told the priest what he had heard in town.

"But do you believe such superstition, Lucas?" the priest queried.

"Not that I do believe, Father, but everybody seems to believe it, as you can see."

"Okay, Lucas," the priest said with sudden bravado, "I will talk to the people and we will shake hands to show them that it is all lies."

The catechist nodded nervously and listened to the priest castigate the congregation for superstitious beliefs.

“Watch us shake hands, and nothing will happen,” he said and invited the trembling catechist who held out an equally trembling hand. The priest, noticing the nervousness in the catechist’s face, rethought his decision and instead of receiving the catechist’s hand, hid his behind his back. He did not see any reason why he should use his own genitals for an experiment as dubious as that.

Hansel was, however, very impressed by the fact that drums and African songs were played in church although he would have loved to hear some Beethoven or Handel to cap it all. There were, also, black statues of Jesus which he considered an important innovation, even though Jesus was a white man.

After the Mass Hansel noticed that for many people that moment was the main event, and they all looked forward to it. They hugged and embraced each other, pointing out:

“I saw you when you were going for communion, I just told myself to wait until we closed from the church.”

Another was saying, “I have some visitors at home, I told them to wait for me, it is past the time. That dull priest wasted so much time at the gospel... Next time I will wait and enter only after gospel.” The same lady was looking for and finally saw a certain woman in blue lace.

“Madam, that your lace is wonderful,” she said. “You were just in front of me in the line for communion and I kept my eyes on you so much that I didn’t even know when I had reached the priest.”

The woman with the blue lace smiled and thanked her.

“I bought it from Cotonou,” the woman said.

“Just watch me next Sunday, I have something very close to that. Only it is slightly old.”

Two persons complained of missing mobile phones and vowed, as a result, never to set foot in that church.

Hansel was greeted by friends, relatives and neighbours like one from another planet. Everybody was glad to see him and all the credit went to Marion. For instance everybody seemed to be asking:

“Madam, what have you finally given your man to make him come to church?”

“God is great,” she would say.

Somebody he thought he could not recognise told him sincerely,

“It is good for people like you to finally decide to come to church because when we see you we know that we are not deceiving ourselves.”

Hansel was stunned by the number of people who cared about him and who were pleased to see him there. To Salomey be the glory, he told himself.

Chapter Ten

Armed with the letter, Hansel began to reap the fruits of his ingenuity almost immediately. He needed to travel to Bangui as soon as possible, as the appointment letter indicated. That entailed money, a lot of it, which he did not have at that particular point in time. Since he was not expecting anything wonderful to come out of his internet connections, he had not been saving towards anything. The letter and the invitation to travel immediately had therefore taken them all by surprise. He would need to borrow money for the purpose. But, seeing that he would soon be swimming in money, he needed to be very careful with the kind of person or persons from whom he was going for help.

Salomey offered to hunt for 500,000 francs to bail him out, and she could do that as early as noon the next day, knowing that the money would be repaid within the next couple of weeks. In that case, Hansel would try to get a passport in the morning and, if possible, leave for Douala in the evening. In Douala he would try to get a visa from the Embassy of the Republic of Central Africa and then book a flight for Bangui. Hansel showed the letter to two other persons of great respect and, with the promise that money would not be long in coming, he got another 500,000 francs.

The following day in the evening he left Bamenda, after having made it known that he was going to Bangui. He looked his best. His shoes were just as beautifully shined as ever, although they were not in the best condition. His suit was made of bold material, it had gone too often to the

cleaner, but it was in excellent press. His shirt which belonged to the days of his prosperity at the bank was shrunk at the collar and fitted loosely. It had a green pattern of squares within squares interspersed with small circular designs with black dots at the centre. His tie and pocket handkerchief were of matching green.

At Mbanga instead of continuing he got off the Douala bound bus and took a train to Kumba where he summoned Michael and Sebastian, showed them the awe-inspiring and heart warming letter. If everything went well, Michael would work for the company as his driver and personal body guard on a very good salary. Sebastian would also be employed in the field. Talking now in his capacity as the acknowledged head of the family, the Ta'ata, he told them:

“I need to travel to Bangui for at least one week. To realize this goal and then to help me set up office I need at least 20 million francs, which will be reimbursed in due course. And that is money which, all things being equal, I can raise again in just a few months in Bangui.”

It was at this juncture that he proposed the sale of the farm lands which their father had left behind. In defence of his position Hansel further argued that there was far too much bickering amongst the brothers which boded ill for the future of the family and the farms. He drew attention, which was true, to the fact that even while the father was still alive, Michael had abandoned his driving and motor mechanic job and had seized one of the farms which he claimed to be his. He was such a bully that neither the dying man nor all the other children together could restrain him. There was their widowed sister Henrietta, who had seized a portion of one of the farms. Jerome, an epileptic, Donald and Matilda, a divorcee, all wanted the farms to be shared out equally amongst them. Hansel said he would sell the farms and give each person a million francs to either set up a business of his own or open his or her own farm.

It was no difficulty finding a buyer. Hansel even seems to have some discussion along those lines with some business tycoons in Kumba. The location of the land made it very easily marketable. It was near the railway terminal and stretched at the back to the new market area. People who had been rebuffed by Pa Bolingo Motombo were only too glad to learn that the property had been put for sale. The farms were sold for the sum of 32 million francs. It was to remain a family secret. Not even his wife was to know about it. Sebastian was bribed into silence with the sum of 5 million francs instead of the one million that was promised. Michael got two million francs with the assurance that upon Hansel's return from Bangui he would begin work in Bamenda. The others got one million francs each. Before he left Kumba he informed Sebastian and Michael that he intended to use about 5 million francs to travel to China to attend an interview for an international job from which he could make enough money to solve all the family problems.

Now sure of at least 20 million francs he decided to put into practice a plan that had floated in the backwaters of his mind ever since he left the bank, and which had been the motive force behind his violation of their tradition concerning the succession to his father's title. The thought made him overcome with excitement. Now he would not just play his cards well, he would pull a joker, the joker of jokers. It was concluded, he would be rich beyond measure. He would build an edifice from crumbs falling from the tables of those whom fortune had already favoured, and for very long. His brain smoked with the joy of anticipation and the prospects of commanding a huge wealth of his own jangled the very bones of his skull.

Chapter Eleven

From Kumba he left for Douala. It is said that good deeds are never wasted, that they are like money in the bank which you could call on when the going is tough. This was precisely what happened to Hansel as he drove towards Douala. Having created the impression that he was in working relationship with the Chinese, it was imperative for him to know somebody in or out of the country who had connections with people from the Oriental or Chinese zone. It occurred to him that once upon a Saturday afternoon when he was sojourning in Douala he stumbled on a gentleman of oriental stock. He didn't know him at the time. The man was surrounded by a noisy gang of young men. A member of the gang had found a ten thousand franc note just as the man passed by. The young man had drawn his attention to the money which he had picked up and ran up to the man and tried to persuade him that it was his money. The man was just lucky that he did not take the money because, in the first place, it was counterfeit and the next thing they would have done would have been to call in the police, claiming that he had tried to buy something from them with the counterfeit.

When in the end the man refused to take the money they suddenly fabricated a charge against him. It was at the New Deido Market, the most disorderly and noisy as well as insecure place one could ever imagine on earth: behind basins of garri or beans which themselves stood on dead rats, rotten banana peelings a woman stood advertising second hand pants at the top of her voice. Amidst bundles of plantains were meat sellers, children, some as young as

four, sold bitter kola or sweets or biscuits; sellers of exercise books mingled with vendors of shoes, umbrellas, each trying to outdo the other in shouting to attract customers. There were no public toilets, any form of shelter stank of human wastes because men, women and children took advantage of the shelter to relieve themselves. There was everything in that market (it was rumoured that human skulls were available!), the problem was how to search for it since sheds were not numbered and the market was not mapped out according to the various items.

Rats bigger than any pussycat could be seen fighting with dogs over some decaying foodstuff. The rats in Douala were a breed apart, giving rise to the popular belief that they were mostly human beings who had transformed. They were not afraid to sit in the parlour and watch television with human occupants of the house. They wouldn't fall into any rat trap, wouldn't go near any poisoned food and would scream like human beings when caught accidentally. People going to hunt them armed themselves as if they were going to fight lions, with sticks and cutlasses. And when hurt, a Douala rat would cry like a human child, shedding tears in the process. There is a story of a certain rat that, when caught, wept and pleaded for mercy in the Douala dialect.

It was in this market that another white man who had been trailed, left his wife sitting in the car and went into a textile shop. A gang showed up suddenly and carried the woman out of the car as she screamed for help. Her husband hearing her wife's voice ran out to find her struggling in mid air in the hands of bandits. He flung his brief case in his car and ran to rescue his wife. Immediately, another bandit opened the car and carried away the targeted item. The bandits soon released the woman, but his bag was gone.

In the middle of all this confusion and sweltering heat, the tiny white man stood trapped on a trumped up charge, a total stranger, being accused of trying to entice an under-

aged girl with money with the intention of taking her away and defiling her. The man who vigorously denied the charge was having a very hard time expressing or defending himself. All they wanted to do was to get him into a situation in which he would lose his laptop computer or some money or both. New Deido Market was the riskiest place to visit in Douala. Gangs of pickpockets and loafers of all categories and ages had made the place their home.

Hansel watched them from a distance for a long time and then alerted the police just in time, who came and dispersed the bandits and walked the man into safety. Since one of the rascals could still be watching, Hansel suggested to the man that they take a taxi out of there. The man who had already been told by the policeman that he should be thankful to Hansel for saving his life, agreed and they stopped a taxi which took them a good distance away from the place before they got off.

The man proposed a drink and they went into a nearby bar where they sat at the veranda. Hansel took a small coke for himself while the man took a beer. The man said he was surprised to see a Cameroonian not drinking beer because, as he said, he did not think there was any other country in the world where people drank half as much beer as Cameroon. He did not speak very good English but they communicated quite well. He would nod his head like a lizard as soon as Hansel started speaking, even when he was not understanding a word of what was being said. He looked very friendly all the same.

He was much smaller than Hansel who was not himself a very big man. He had a freckled face and hands, well-trimmed and polished black hair. His hands were equally small and he had a pair of quick darting Mongolian eyes. His neck was too thin but he managed to hang a tie which hung as loosely as a rope around the neck of a chicken.

They introduced themselves and exchanged complimentary cards. : Hansel, a former banker ran a smalltime consultancy in Bamenda. The white man was Kunakawa Sunuki, a Japanese engineer who was working on projects for a trade fair which Japan was planning to mount in Douala. Hansel did not think of the man until that day as he travelled to Douala, two full years afterwards. He simply consulted his complimentary card carrier, the card was there. When he arrived Douala he called up the man who could scarcely recall who he was. However, he managed to get the man's hotel address. It was not too far from where he himself had planned to put up.

That very evening he visited Sunuki. The man recognised Hansel the moment he saw him and they embraced each other just as good old friends do when they meet after a long separation. Hansel told him he wanted to expand his business. He was planning to go into Real Estate or mining. Sunuki discouraged the idea of Real Estate but told him the dangers in the mining industry. Sunuki visited him in his hotel the next day where they discussed several business lines. Hansel, in an effort to ingratiate himself with the man told him the story of how his junior brother who had been taken away to somewhere in Japan by a Japanese business partner several years ago had sent him a lot of money and he was looking for profitable sources of investment.

The man made several suggestions and when Hansel suggested putting a small beautiful house to serve as his office, the man even showed him two copies of JOURNAL OF ARCHITECTURE. It was a publication of the Association of Japanese Architects in Yokohama. There was some literature about buildings. But the bulk of the publication was made up of the pictures of beautiful buildings of different levels, followed immediately by the plans and step by step guides on how to realise each project. Sunuki gave Hansel a copy of the journals for he had two.

Hansel studied the book all night and by the next day he had made several choices. When he met Sunuki the two sat and narrowed down the choices to three. Hansel discovered that it was possible to combine elements of the structure of one building with those of another if the entire building could, for some reason, not be constructed. They selected the main items from three pictures and plans which they wanted to have combined into a single structural plan. The two of them drove round and finally found a draftsman who promised to produce a plan of the composite structure within two days, one of which he actually implemented on his return to Bamenda.

What he gained from the encounter was not the drink, the business advice or the plans Sunuki displayed. Over and above all, he had found a Japanese who should look like a Chinese to the untrained eye. He had struck a good relationship with the man who could visit him in Bamenda at any time to boost just by his silent presence alone, the idea of Chinese cooperation. He made sure they spent a long time together each day for the period during which he was in Douala and before they parted they took several pictures, Hansel having bought himself a good Canon camera. The man took Hansel to a hauling mill where they took other pictures. Thus before he left Douala he had created a small album of himself and his Japanese friend in various situations and activities.

On the fourth day when he informed Sunuki that he needed a good four-wheel drive vehicle, the man led him to a Japanese warehouse where they were auctioning the newest brand of SKIPPIO A1s. It would normally cost something like forty million francs. With the intervention of Sunuki who told his compatriots that Hansel was a big investor with interest in visiting Japan, they were ready to give it for twenty million.”

“Or if you are not comfortable with that, you buy mine for my price,” Sunuki suggested. “I drive them around for advertisement purposes, so it is like new.” Sunuki was an astute businessman who had no way of knowing that Hansel’s business had reached a dead end. He was, as it is said, throwing grains of corn to a chicken in order to catch it. When the Japanese decided to explore the Bamenda market area, it is with people of trust, like Hansel, that they would be dealing. He had better started cultivating the friendship. He did not know that Hansel valued the relationship even more even if it went no farther than this. Sunuki may have thought that he was throwing corn to a chicken, it was actually the chicken that was throwing corn to the master.

Hansel went and inspected the car with renewed interest. It was not just “like new”, it was brand new.

“What would be your price for this second hand?” Hansel asked nervously. He deliberately used the adjective “second hand” to cause the Japanese to lower the price even more.

“How much do you offer? How much did you bring with you to buy a car?”

“I had five million, but could add to it.” It was true that when Hansel was thinking of buying a vehicle he was thinking of one within the five million francs range. But he never even remotely thought of driving a SKIPPIO A1, that would have meant putting in all the money he had laboured to get. But now that it had come his way, it suited his purpose very much. It would only make his Bangui story believable beyond his wildest imagination.

“You don’t need to add to it, the car is yours. Tell me when you want to pay for it and I will have them clean it perfectly for you.”

“Right away. I can pay right away if you need it.”

“Who doesn’t need money? I came out here to look for money.”

In Sunuki's view, man as well placed as Hansel was the best means to advertise the car. They went into the car and Hansel put his hands into his breast pockets and pulled out bundles of notes from which he counted five million francs and gave his friend. A receipt was made out in his name. The car was now his car.

"Unless you need to continue using the car," he told Sunuki, "I could take it away and arrange for it to be cleaned in the hotel."

"No problem."

The Japanese man did not conceal his love and respect for Hansel. He found that Hansel was a serious man by nature and very frank about many things, especially about money. He confessed that Hansel was the first Cameroonian he had met who was not a beggar. The others come up to him and greet him and within seconds tell stories of their starving families, of lost wallets and all sorts of unbelievable tales. Hansel was different: whatever he did for a living, Sunuki thought, he looked very comfortable, the kind of man to do business with.

Hansel drove Sunuki to the draughtsman where they collected the completed plan of the building he planned to put up back in Bamenda.

"In a month I will invite you up in Bamenda to inspect the completed building

"It will be my pleasure. I have heard of the place. That is where Fru Ndi lives, right?"

"Yeah, that is his base. That man has made Bamenda great."

Not much of a politician himself, Hansel did not discuss the Fru Ndi name further.

Hansel bought Classical Music CDs for the car. He then decided to replenish his wardrobe. He must look like somebody on two million francs a month, just back from out of the country on a successful business trip. He bought three brand new pairs of shoes, three suits, eight long-sleeved shirts, five neckties, a gold watch and a matching wrist chain, several pairs of socks and three leather sandals. He was now ready to return to Bamenda. Anybody seeing him in Bamenda would know that he had returned from a profitable journey. He had enough time to produce a very ingenious brochure for the company and had a complimentary card printed for him in which he emphasised the assumed titles of Prince and Managing-Director:

PRINCE Hansel Bolingo

Managing-Director

CRABS AND SHELLS CAMEROON

P.O. Box 985

Tel: 775 11 21;

e-mail: princehanselbol@yahoo.co.fr

Chapter Twelve

Hansel meant to take Bamenda by storm as far as his company was concerned. One way of attracting responsible public attention, he thought, was to erect an eye-catching building at a strategic location in Bamenda. He recalled that sometime ago as he drove past T-Junction at the end of the Commercial Avenue, directly opposite the famous Experimental Alimentation, he had seen a notice: PLOT AND HOUSE FOR SALE. With that concluded in his mind, he spent several days in Douala conceiving the shape his projected office would take. He got a draftsman to slightly modify one of the plans his Japanese friend had proposed to him.

He landed in Bamenda like a comet. When he arrived even his detractors nodded with satisfaction that he had suddenly stepped into money somewhere, an El Dorado or something of the sort. He entered Bamenda just a little after mid-day when most people would be out in the street on lunch break. There was no rain. He was driving the vehicle himself, a glittering deep-to-cream SKIPPIO A1. A SKIPPIO A1 is a dream car. It had what the most modern Land Cruisers had and more, a lot more. It was the first and only one in the North West. Only television viewers were used to seeing it in advertisements. It stood like a rhinoceros, or even an African elephant, huge, imposing, scary at the same time.

Many of its features were familiar but a lot more fanciful: it had a silver or perhaps an aluminium front bumper that projected in front of the car like the front loader of a caterpillar. But it differed from the other brands in that the

bumper could be adjusted, it could be made to rise or go lower from within. It had a pair of unusually huge headlights on either side, a pair of parking lights, each of these of giant size. At night when he put on his headlights, others became so blinded by its glare that the drivers usually pulled to the side and waited until he had passed. There was a mechanism inside which could cause the entire chassis to rise to about half a metre above the tires, should the situation arise.

A protective shield rose in front of the radiator grill with six fog light tinted yellow. The windscreen was tinted dark yellowish. The windows all tinted dark green from inside but glazed with reflecting glass from outside, were all worked electronically, including the back windscreen. On both the driver's and the passenger's side was a pair of driving mirrors, one large and the other slightly smaller. On the larger mirror were written the following warning: *Objects seen in this mirror may be nearer than reflected.* The vehicle was a ten-seater: three persons could sit in front, four in the second row and four more in the far back, two facing each other. It was not yet matriculated. To the untutored eye, it was a brand new vehicle and definitely cost at least 50 million francs. This exaggeration suited him very well.

He parked his beloved Peugeot 504, suspending chassis, tires and all on concrete blocks in front of his new office. He ignored nothing that could draw attention to his changed circumstances. The parking of this car which he treated and spoke of as a good personal friend, was the most eloquent sign that he had bade good bye to a particular period of his life and opened a new one. When the whole world seemed to be closing in on him in the guise of poverty, the car, with all its problems remained the one thing he held on to salvage his crushed ego. He was the first to admit the age of the car and to tell jokes about it. For instance, he once remarked to a mechanic that no part of the vehicle at the moment was original. All its original parts had long been replaced.

On another occasion he said that because of the uncertain condition of the car, his neighbours feared entering it for fear that they would have to push it every now and then. Hence, he said, whenever he met a neighbour going the same direction as himself and offered to give him or her a lift, the man would simply say, "thank you neighbour, I have already reached where I am going."

He called on a Real Estate Agent to whom he presented the problem. As it sometimes happens, all omens were working in his favour: there was still a plot directly opposite the famous EXPERIMENTAL ALIMENTATION at the T-Junction. Talking of a strategic location, you could not beat that. They drove to the place where Hansel confirmed the strategic nature as the best suited for his purpose. He paid the man seven million francs cash down.

Next he invited the Director of FRU, FRU AND CO, the best and most reliable construction firm in town. He showed Ni Bonadventure, the contractor the plan of the office building he would want to put up.

"I want the keys to this house handed over to me in two weeks," Hans said half seriously.

"Even in a week, boss," Ni Bona said in the same spirit.

"I hope you do not suppose that I am joking," Hans warned.

"I am not joking, sir. I am here on business. All I am saying is that if the money is there, the job will be done as soon as you need."

"Of course, the money is certainly there."

The contractor retired to make his estimates. In less than two hours he called Hans up. The building, complete with the painting would cost 11 million francs including labour. Hans advanced him 5 million francs.

“I will meet the deadline,” the contractor promised. “What usually delays building construction is the fact that we have to make the blocks we are to use and wait until they get dry. In this case we will simply go in for ready-made blocks. I don’t see what will delay us. We will work both day and night.”

“It is a deal,” said Hans, and on that note they separated.

Ni Bona was as good as his word. By the end of the day he had started dumping building materials. The very next day he had mounted a high fence of old iron sheets behind which he set to work.

It took seven days longer than the contractor had promised. The miracle was that he had completed the job at all. Contractors were notorious for accepting jobs of all kinds, insisting on advance payment, giving you the impression that the work had begun or would soon begin, and going elsewhere, looking for other jobs. They would complain of inavailability of the right concrete, the right type of sand and the like. Ni Bona was different, perhaps because Hans had intimated that he would require two similar houses constructed, he was anxious to remain topmost in the man’s good books. Be it as it may, the wonder building had been raised, or rather as passers-by described, the building *had been planted on the plot*, to the amazement of the public.

Occupying an area of 22 metres by 35, the massive structure stood ten metres high, 12 metres wide and 24 metres long. Having the shape of a rectangle, the frontage was embellished with a porch or veranda that projected into the front yard for about four metres, with a huge concrete slab serving as the roof. Extending from the main wall on the inside, the slab was supported on the outside by two

cylindrical columns, each about a whole metre in circumference. At the base of the columns were two complimentary earthen pots or, shall we say, Chinaware pots. They were complimentary because, engraved on the one to the left, were two large crabs, one on the inside and the other on the outside. The pot on the right bore the image of two large shells, one on the insider and the other in the outside. The main door was of panelled, seasoned mahogany so delicately polished that you got the distinct sensation that the polish would stick if you touched it.

On either side of the door was a very large window, an oval cavity of about a metre and a half in height and about a metre across. The inside of the window was a rectangle. To the extreme right of the front wall was a spacious garage which opened into a two-metre wide corridor which led to a toilet to the right and to a side door that led into the sitting room. Opposite the angle from which the corridor branched off to go to the toilet, there was a smaller panelled door that led into the Managing-Director's office.

The walls in front, to the gable ends and the back were not painted. They were lined with pink 6-cm enamel tiles. The inside walls were lined with slightly larger cream tiles. The floors including the veranda, were covered with 10-centimetre tiles, the colour of grey with white dots.

By the time the building was completed, tongues had wagged until they bled, while the rumour mongers and gossip mills had one field day after another. Whatever the source of his wealth, one thing was clear in every observer's mind: this metamorphosis only took place after Hans returned from his one week or so absence, during which he said he had been in Bangui.

When the office was completely set up he invited his two brothers as promised. Michael, the hulky bully and terror of the family was to be his driver and body guard. He was placed on a monthly salary of 100,000 francs. Although the man hadn't the slightest idea of what the company really was, he served Hansel with great devotion. And he loved the job because whenever Hansel was to travel to Bangui, he would ask Michael to go on a two-week or one week holiday. On those occasions he would give Michael about 50,000 francs for his upkeep. Sebastian, the disinherited younger brother was given a job in the field. Occasionally he would hang around the office keeping things in place, dusting shelves, picking papers and keeping away intruders. He received the sum of 75,000 francs a month for his troubles.

Salomey was one of the persons who had applied for the computer job. She had been very specially recommended by somebody who did not even know that Hans knew her. The gentleman with whom Hans had planned the exercise, had reached him through Marion, his wife, and she was the one who *first* mentioned the name to Hansel on the eve of the interview. At the interview Hansel had informed her to go and that the rest would be discussed at home. That evening he went there.

"I have looked round," he began, "and I find nobody to my liking who can handle the cashier job."

She did not protest on account of their intimate relationship which may get into his wife's ears sooner than necessary. She assumed that he knew the danger and must have thought of how to handle it, should such a situation ever arise. She merely asked him what the job entailed. They did not discuss the salary. It was Hansel himself who proposed the mighty figure of 200,000 francs.

"What happens to my present job at the Insurance?"

"You will quit. What is 50,000 francs compared to 200,000 francs?"

Chapter Thirteen

He went to CLUB 49 fairly regularly to play either draughts or snooker. He was not a competitive player in either game, but he was very dedicated to both. He had not been there for a month or so since the Bangui project became a reality. That Monday afternoon he decided to take the good news to those who mattered for CLUB 49 was essentially an old people's corner for relaxation. A majority of members were retired senior civil servants and businessmen, many of whom were not only very rich, but would certainly be interested in putting their money in any enterprise that would give them substantial dividends without any apparent strain.

He had a seat in the corner near the TV where he sat regularly when he was not playing. He did not drink alcohol in any form, as a matter of habit, though he offered a drink or two on the very rare occasions when he had some money. But he had the reputation among club members as a man who had planted himself permanently on the receiving end of favours and drinks, while giving nothing in return. He alone knew his problem. It was because of the lack of money, not the absence of the will to give. Since leaving the bank, and with his dwindling financial resources, the circle of his acquaintances was narrowing by the day as he became more and more incapable of raising money to meet the various engagements that bound social groups together. And it was not in his nature to thrust his friendship on others who did not know him well. He was not the kind of man to be given any lessons on companionship. He knew that if there was any positive factor not only in the formation of character

but in the estimation of man's true worth, that factor was companionship. He knew that companionship is at once an influence on character and a measure of one's real worth. That explained why in spite of all the problems confronting him year in year out, he always made sure that he kept a clean record with the CLUB. But he also knew that companionship meant spending, reciprocating generosity.

He had come in a cream suit: a double-breasted jacket over a sparkling white shirt with tiny grey lines. He was anxious to behave like somebody who had actually been to Bangui on a mission that involved a lot of cash, much of which he had to spend. Being the shy person that he was, he went up to the President of the Club and they spoke for some time.

"When I went home, Pa, for my father's funeral my people spoiled me with a traditional title," he was talking and pointing to a black raffia cap on his head with a red feather, probably of some fowl, and two spikes of a porcupine stuck to it. "I was forced to become my late father's successor. My late father was a Ta'ata, and I am that now."

"So from today you are no longer Mr. Hans but Ta..." Mr. Limen Isidore hesitated for a second, "what's the equivalent in English?"

"Prince, or something of the sort." Hansel said with all pomp. "My people value titles very much and so it will be good for them to hear that the title is being widely used." Hansel had actually chosen the best moment to introduce his new title. The papers would start blowing it up the very next morning.

"So from now henceforth you will be called PRINCE!"

"That's right," Hansel admitted. "And then I would like to give everybody a drink for the car and the title, everybody."

The President was so taken aback that he inadvertently asked: "Why?" before correcting himself to ask: "Is that so?"

“Sure. People emptied their pockets to give me a drink here when I hadn’t. How can I forget them now that things look different?”

“So we can say that the bad days are gone, Prince?”

“You can say that again,” Hansel said with a touch of pride.

The President took to the centre of the floor between the bar section and the snooker compartment and announced: “Ladies and gentlemen, Prince Hansel, the man we are used to calling MR HANSEL has just been crowned in his village with the title of PRINCE. The Prince wants to give everybody a drink, everybody, in honour of the red feather. Can we clap for that. The barman is ready with your choices.”

He would repeat the act on Wednesday and then on Friday. There was a loud and long applause because this was happening when salaries and pensions were not being expected for another week. He himself stood at the counter, sipping a small coke. It was when the people went gratefully but unbelievably that they noticed his changed attire which they immediately began to admire.

“What are we celebrating, Hans?” a member asked.

“The SKIPPIO A1 nah,” Philipussy, the bar boy cut in. He was one of the very few persons who had seen Hans alight from the car. Many who saw him climb down didn’t think it could be him. Those who came in after he had settled down passed the vehicle without much surprise because they did not associate Hans with any such wealth.

“Yes, there is a SKIPPIO A1 outside,” somebody confirmed. “I thought it was for some diplomat or so. It’s new here. Is it yours, Chief Hans?”

Hans smiled his knowing smile and admitted, “Yeah. I am a Ta’ata, a Prince if you like, not a chief yet.”

“Lets go out and pour water on Hansel’s newest acquisition,” the President suggested. Glass in hand the members streamed out into the parking lot where the road

master stood. Hansel beckoned to Philipussy, when the boy came he asked him to bring a crate of Becks Beer and a bottle of Whiskey.

"This one is for the libation of the car," he said, dragging the crate and whiskey and placing it on the bonnet. He jumped in while they were still going round and round in wonder when he put on the alarm. It was like fifty bugles all blasted at once.

Some warm hearted gentleman dropped in:

"Which Fulani man has sold cows and is giving drinks to the extent that even my old friend Hansel is also drinking?"

There was a general laugh, although there was a grain of truth in it.

"The Prince himself is the Fulani man," Philipussy the bar boy put in cheerfully.

The newcomer tapped Hansel on the shoulder several times and said: "It is good to see things happen like this once in a while. Congrats, Prince, and congrats for your new title too."

He had never been a talkative person, and on this particular occasion he did not seem in a mood to dilate on his newfound good fortune. He feigned embarrassment at the fact that the President was passing a brochure round. And when somebody asked, "Hans how can you carry only a single brochure to a place like this? The people who matter are here and nowhere else." He went out very reluctantly and brought in about ten more which he nonchalantly threw on the counter. The old men scrambled for it. The curiosity of the club members was instantly whetted by the brochure, a copy of which Philip posted on the notice board. On the top left hand corner at the back was a picture of Hansel admiring the coffee mill in Douala or was it Bangui? On the

top right hand corner was the picture of Sunuki or rather his alter ego, Lee Ping Yung. Hans simply smiled and remained tight-lipped, an attitude which generated a lot of steam and an anxiety that was already reaching fever pitch. It was as he had thought.

Whenever there is a long spell of good weather during the rainy season, the rain falls with a vengeance when it decides to fall. This looked like such a night. There was a ceaseless rumbling of thunder, and then a clatter. Lightening zipped the troubled evening sky. Banana and plantain plants could be seen tossed left and right and then to the ground, unripe mangoes were heard dropping on the roof and then rolling to the edge of the roof and then falling to the ground. It tore the roof of the garage and flung the zinc across the street onto a passing taxi, breaking the windscreen. When the heavy grains began to fall on the zinc people were compelled to break up into small groups to carry on their conversation.

Hansel drew the Club President aside and said confidentially, "it is not that I don't want to talk about this Bangui Bonanza. You know me, I am not in the habit of talking much, especially when there are so many people, everybody asking a different question. Come to my office tomorrow at ten...,Let's see," he consulted his appointment book and said, "Come at eleven, sir. I will tell you all that you need to know."

Chapter Fourteen

Let me show you round, sir,” Hans said when the man met him at the veranda. Under his tutelage Mr. Limen Isidore proceeded on a careful inspection of the house. They followed the corridor adjacent to the garage and entered Hansel’s office by the side or interior door. He turned the key and pushed , the door gave a mournful groan. “This is my *small* office,” he said with deliberate irony.

“The understatement of the century,” Mr. Limen said as he surveyed the spacious and painstakingly furnished room. There was a large rectangular window (oval shaped when viewed from the outside to the back wall with thick, bright yellow curtains pulled and fastened at the centre. Facing the side door from the garage end was another panelled door of the same polished mahogany. It led into the general secretariat. There was a much large door to the left which opened into the main sitting area. Behind that door was a high Television and Video stand with a brand new 20 inch screen with the remote control lying on Hansel’s table. Slightly resting against the curtain which reached almost to the floor, stood a large rotating executive chair coated with black leather. In front of the executive chair was a well polished table, his own side shaped like an arch. To the right of the chair was a small kettle on a small high glass-topped coffee table.

On another table that ran from the Coffee stand to just behind the secretariat door was an array of electronic gadgets: a Pentium 4 computer, a Laser Jet printer, a Scanner and a fax machine. Hans also had a laptop which he carried

in a leather casing under his armpit when they entered the office. To the left of the executive chair and a little concealed behind the door shutter was a small safe buried in the wall. The lower part of the safe was cut off by a low table on which there was a small FM radio and a large cassette player which Hans turned on to the sound of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, as soon as he sat down behind the desk. It was mellifluous and sounded as though it came from some distance outside the office. The stereo effects were good. Next to the table with the musical instruments stood a small fridge. A wall-to-wall Moroccan rug (actually two rugs sewn together) which Mr. Limen later described in conversation elsewhere as ankle deep, covered the floor of all the rooms. There was a small window on the wall to the secretariat fitted with a device through which he could have an entire view of the office from looking into a small crystal ball.

"I give you something to drink?" Hans enquired from his bewildered visitor. The man was still reflecting when he added, "Coffee, beer, sweet drink, or what?"

Mr. Limen could scarcely remember when he last took coffee in an office.

"Coffee will do."

Hans plugged the kettle and in a few minutes it began to boil. "How would you like it, with milk, sugar...?"

While the man was still reflecting again, he poured the hot water into two cups, served himself sugar and milk and pushed a small tray of sugar, milk and honey to the President. The man put some milk in his coffee and began to stir, he did not take sugar. He was diabetic. Let's take a look round," Hans suggested as he rose with his cup of coffee in hand. They entered the secretariat: two long work tables facing each other on either side, a computer and a dot matrix printer on one and on the other a large Pentium 2 computer and a laser printer. Behind each table and

spanning the entire width, broken only by the window space, were two floor-to-ceiling book shelves with each compartment labelled alphabetically.

Adjacent to the secretariat was the cashier's glass cubicle with its own computer and printer and a small opening through which financial transactions were carried out. The Assistant Manager's office was attached to that of the cashier although there was no door linking the two. At a corner close to the office of the Assistant Manager, stood a rectangular table with six cane chairs, intricately and beautifully woven. On a high stool near the table was an electric kettle, larger than the one in Hansel's office. In the middle of the table stood a tray with glasses, teacups and spoons, a packet of sugar, a tin of Nescafe and a packet of Tole tea.

The sitting area was slightly raised, about 30 cm high, and with flood lights right round to guide your feet. This raised area occupied about 3 by 3 metres with a low wall of about 50 cm running round it to prevent customers from falling off. In the centre stood a high glass-topped coffee table. Each of the armchairs had a transparent side stool by its side on which stood a large sea shell serving as the ash tray. The armchairs looked in outline like wheel chairs. The back rest had an oval shape, while the arms were virtually circles of wood overlaid with dark brown leather. The entire wall to the garage side of the room was covered with a thick mirror so large that momentarily forgetting themselves and mistaking the reflections for an extension of the parlour have found themselves waving greetings to their own images in the mirror.

Chapter Fifteen

You've struck it rich, Mr. Bolingo, you have struck gold," Mr. Limen addressed him formally by his second name for the first time. "Your office alone tells it all."

Hans smiled to himself. Unlike most Cameroonians, Hans was a voracious reader and like most widely read people, it showed in his conversation which was usually larded with sayings from great thinkers.

"I must be honest with you, sir, I think I have struck a gold mine in Bangui from which many forward-looking Cameroonians will make their fortune, if only they know *how* to play their cards well."

"I believe you, Prince. I believe you."

"You see, Mr. President, they say there is a divinity that shapes our end, roughhew it how you may," Hans proceeded philosophically. "Things got so consistently bad with me that I had begun to very nearly convince myself that I had no right to expect from life anything more than what it offered me. But I kept trying things, pressing buttons left and right. Now I know that heaven and hell are two different entities, that there is a point in time and space where hell ends and heaven takes over."

He smiled again.

The man could not contain his amazement, just the kind of person Hansel wanted to show around.

"You've crossed the threshold of hell it seems to me," he said. "You have removed your name from the list of poor people at a single stroke. What's the secret, Mr. Hansel? What's all this Bangui crab thing about?"

By way of a response Hans pulled one of the drawers under the table and drew out a folder from which he pulled out his appointment letter from China.

"It's no gimmick, sir," Hansel said, handing over the letter to the man. "You see, life in this modern world is going so fast that you have to run extremely fast even if you want to remain on the same spot."

The man nodded, his mind was on the letter. Hans allowed him time to read it and when he had finished Mr. Limen Isidore heaved a very heavy sigh in which you sensed a feeling of inadequacy, of envy.

"This is great," he admitted, "to say the least."

As he returned the letter to Hans he pressed on, "But what exactly is the activity of the company out there? You know I shall be talking about it to friends, so it is important for me to be able to say something reasonable. You cannot guess how anxious I am to get into this thing."

"Crabs, Mr. President. Crabs," Hansel began somewhat hesitantly for it was not an area on which he could talk from a position of strength. But he succeeded in convincing Limen Isidore about it. "Scientists found an unusual number of crabs in Lake Bangui which produced a substance called *Crustacoci Glitterus*. The natives of Bangui do not eat crabs or any form of Crustacea, by their tradition, and did not even know the treasure they are sitting on.

And because of the richness of the substance the crabs grow and multiply in a matter of weeks, just like tilapia fish in our ponds, if you know what I mean. The crabs now outnumber the fishes and so the natives are only too glad to find anybody who would rid their lakes of the pests. The crabs of Bangui have been found, in addition, to contain these substances in very high proportions. The only place on this earth to have them in such quantities! That explains why Americans and French are dying in the place, supporting one illegal regime after the other, playing off one against the other.

“Scientists and engineers discovered around 1965 that the soil around Lake Bangui contains a rare substance called Maleabutoris Ductilus, a composition of minerals, a strange kind of white clay containing a mild form of Potabromide Carbonate which when exposed to high temperatures produces a substance called Potabromide Cholocarbonate. These, when melted, is used to produce different forms of chinaware, home and church decorations, trinkets, ornaments...”

This was Greek to Limen Isidore.

“The raw substances are brought by road to our head office in Douala where they are pulverized and then shipped to China where they are then treated. The Chinese have had enough of it and are ready to sell their shares. I am willing to buy them out. I want to make quick money and get out before the natives discover what we have been doing there.”

This again was all Greek to Limen Isidore but he found it interesting just because of the end result, the money that was coming out of the lakes. Prince Hans showed him an e-mail he just received that morning from his boss in Bangui:

Dear Mr. Bolingo Hans;

Was glad to hear from you and how you were getting on. As I did indicate casually, the number of new hands required had increased to about 150 more. I am sincerely disappointed with the work attitude of the natives here. Discuss finance with the Douala office and send the men fast to us. I will be at the Bangui borders personally to receive them. Arrangement for the 4 more 10-ton trucks still holds.

L. P. Yung

Limen Isidore changed the position of his feet and wiped perspiration from his forehead and chin. Just about 1.75 metres in height, Limen Isidore, as he preferred to be called, was a man whose prepossessing appearance commanded instant liking and respect. He had big grey squint eyes set in a large face with a wide humorous mouth that had several stories to tell about women. There was in his entire visage the expression of a man who has tasted the bitterness of life as well as its glories. He had a nose that could only be described as massive, above a toothbrush moustache and a round chin. But for his bawdy tales, he was such a charming personality, with so delightful a sense of humour that affection for him had no reservation. He generally spoke in a low soft voice.

There were two bawdy tales he told and retold ad nauseam. One concerned Mamy Yau, an elderly woman who ran a brothel in the mid-fifties. She brought young girls from distant villages whom she lodged and hired out to men for a fee and for a given length of time. One night a visitor who had paid earlier in the evening delayed for so long in returning to the brothel that Mamy Yau gave the girl with whom they had arranged to a different person. When she noticed the man coming Mamy Yau herself went into the girl's room and hid herself under the blanket. The man came, dead drunk and fell on the bed and had fun. Early the next morning when after the drink had cleared, he noticed that it was the hag herself and not the young girl he had bargained for, he screamed at her. Mamy Yau looked at him and then asked:

“Bot you see any defrend? Lass na lass.”

The second tale concerned Mamy Casingo, a middle-aged woman who was said to have an insatiable appetite for sex. On a table near her bed she kept sweets and kola nuts. Under her bed she kept a bundle of *casingoes* or whips. If you performed very well on her, she gave you sweets (if you

were a young man) or kola nuts (if you were an elderly person). Limen told the part where a young man intending to go to bed with her took her to a nearby bar for a quick drink. Within ten minutes the man had taken three big bottles of Guinness and seven bitter kolas, a substance believed to have the power to sustain sexual pleasure. When he asked for the fourth bottle, Mamy Casingo gave back his money and walked out, muttering to herself: "Better motor jam me than this kan man for clam for ma sikin."

He was a retired Inspector of Taxes, a noble pillar of his profession although he was variously described as naïve, stupid and even treacherous. He had made very many enemies in line of duty amongst big businessmen just by doing his work the way it should be done. If a business deserving of a tax of 25 million francs was charged a tax of 30 million francs, he personally inspected and reassessed and readjusted the charge without asking for or accepting any reward in return. If it was undertaxed he went through the same procedure and imposed the rightful charge on the goods without any fear or favour.

Colleagues of his thought him treacherous and hypocritical, traders who had benefitted from his strictness applauded him as kind while those who suffered losses on his account condemned him as wicked. He always had a kind and encouraging word for everybody, the young, the old, the weak, the strong, the poor, the rich. He addressed everybody "Pa," and, as a result he ended up being called "Pa" by everybody. He was the kind of person to listen to your problems and, even unsolicited, go out of his way to look for a solution. Having spent his years in the civil service educating his younger ones he now enjoyed the rewards of his investments. He would receive a parcel of money every now and then from young men he had helped he did not recall when and where.

There were hundreds of his colleagues all over the country who received businessmen in their offices, assessed their goods without as much as seeing them, and issued tax receipts, thereby making unbelievable sums of money everyday. Limen Isidore was content with the little that was offered him as a monthly salary, from which he was able to educate his children, five of whom were already abroad. He began building a house only when he went on retirement and that was because he was able to receive financial assistance from his first son.

Right now, it was thanks to the boys abroad that he was able to drive a car and carry a mobile phone. But monetary matters aside, Limen Isidore was a man of enormous respect amongst all the members of Club 49 and it was for that reason that he was President for the fourth term running. People respected his opinion. Hansel must have been thinking about this when he invited the man. He knew that with Limen Isidore on his side he did not need to go on the radio, the idea could be considered sold, to the highest bidders.

“Just how can I get in?” he asked again.

“You have seen for yourself, sir, the way things are,” Hansel began modestly.

The man nodded.

“I will certainly need a man like you at this end. See like now where my attention is needed in Douala, in Bamenda and in Bangui, all at the same time. One will break down, nobody is a machine.”

“I am wondering how you must have been handling it till now,” Limen Isidore said with genuine concern.

“Just plain managing,” Hansel told him. “But we cannot manage forever. Getting in is not the issue. A share is 500,000 francs as I told you people yesterday. But getting

the shares is not the problem. Managing the company is the thing. Just indicate how many shares you would require to the cashier when we finish. But I shall require your services. You will have to coordinate the activities of the members here for me. And for that service I am granting you a million francs in shares, two full shares, free. That should tell you how seriously I mean you to take this visit."

He pressed a button on the table and the cashier appeared.

"Prepare a receipt for two full shares in favour of Mr. Limen Isidore. Give him the receipt and debit the company. He is the kind of man who can help reduce this load on my small shoulders."

"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown, goes the saying," Mr. Limen added.

"I know," Hansel said. "Any time you are ready with your other shares," Hansel told him, "you simply add to these. How soon are you coming?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow even. I see myself going in for eight shares, to come up with a round figure."

"Excellent," Hansel praised him. The man took off in a veritable transport of joy.

Chapter Sixteen

It is hard to tell for how long this rigmarole of a jamboree would have lasted, but it was one of those ironies of fate that it met its end just where its very survival depended. Since there was no real operational side to the company, its very success depended solely on the number of new shareholders he was able to recruit, and how well he manipulated the old members. For this reason he never stopped looking for the kind of big fish whose presence was bound to attract more members. This was what brought him to Nfor Jeremiah Nfor, a retired Chief Justice who would turn out to be his very nemesis, a persistent nightmare.

Their appointment was fixed for 10 the next morning. The man Prince Hansel invited to convince and buy over to boost the growing image of his Bangui syndicate was no mean personality. In fact, he was everything that Hansel was not, and was never to be. Physically he was of a very imposing stature: he towered close to two metres in height and was forced to look down on Hansel when they talked standing up, a fact which compelled Hansel to prefer talking to him while they were both sitting down.

He had about him an aura of power, and, in his company you felt almost instantly that this was a man used to giving orders and being listened to. He had about him the seasoned looks of a man who was used to rich furniture and rich surroundings. Hansel read that early and did not even suggest showing the visitor round as he was wont to do. For one thing, he had money and, looking sumptuously dressed was a way of life with him, unlike in the case of Hans who

deliberately got dressed to bamboozle the less fortunate people. He was very clean shaven, a triangle of a moustache straddled his upper lip, concealing its reddishness. He was very light in complexion, most probably a metisse, the offspring of a white and black parents or just some rare biological accident. He had gone slightly bald on the forehead and at the temples. He wore his hair dyed and much care seems to have been taken to conceal the fact. But a thin line of white hair ran round the edges of the hair.

Rather thin of face, he was well built, with broad shoulders; and his thinness of face, with the skin drawn tightly over his prominent cheekbones gave him a strong, energetic or athletic look. His neck was skinny rather than fleshy, wrinkled and even flabby, an indication that he was not as young as you would think at first glance. The wide straight mouth gave to his rather large face a pleasant and benign expression. But the main thing that struck Hansel was the high forehead and below it the deeply set steel-blue eyes which sparkled with intelligence and confidence. He wore an exquisitely tailored, dark blue suit with bright buttons the colour of gold. He was wearing a pink, striped shirt, a brown tie and a matching breast pocket handkerchief..

He stretched his hands flat on the table, a white pair of hands which he raised from time to time, on an eye-catching 2001 Diary. His fingers were long, in proportion to his height. He had well manicured fingernails and was wearing a gold watch and a gold finger ring. This very quick assessment put Hans on his guard in a hurry. He would not talk to him like any other client. His presence radiated authority, real authority. He looked proud without being supercilious and when he later turned down the offer it was because he needed to gauge the situation rather than that it was beneath his dignity.

One clue to his authority and well-being, as Hans concluded (and will remember that), was an object which may have escaped the attention of many, the bag he carried. Hansel was struck not by the LIONS CLUB or ROTARY INTERNATIONAL stickers which he pasted on the bag but its substance. It was made of original brown leather and there was no indication that it could have been purchased second hand. It could cost 50,000 francs and more.

"Nice bag you have," Hans was forced to comment on it with a touch of jealousy.

"Thanks," Justice Nfor Nfor said with winsome ordinariness. "Got it at a fair in Stockholm. Not in the newest form, but I think I love its fine leathery finishing. "So let's get down to business so that we can part and take care of other matters," the man of Law said with a slight touch of condescension which Hansel could not miss, just what he hated to sense. "Why am I here? You asked to see me." He spoke with a sonorous voice, with a genuine inner conviction which made Hansel look like a joker, especially as he was sitting on borrowed titles, *like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief*, or *a beauty and the beast* in fairy tales.

The cautious side of his nature told Hans instantly that he had looked for trouble himself. As his people say, it was the cricket's own noise that attracted its own enemies to find it and catch. Hansel quickly rethought his intentions. If it were a lesser man, the kind of man he had in mind when the initial idea struck him, Hansel would have made an outright purchase proposal. Now as he studied the colossus his mind seemed to change. He scratched his head and for a nervous moment gasped for speech, and then immediately checked himself, quickly reassembled his thoughts and tried to be impressive.

"Yes, Mr. Justice, in the words of Reinhold Mibuhur, 'the structure of man is such that he cannot complete himself within himself.'"

The man's brows knotted and he nodded but without understanding the full import of the quote.

"I asked you so that you can come for us to see on what terms you could give me legal advice on how to run this my small Bangui project. It all began like a joke, but it is now engulfing the whole world...."

"What is it all about? Mr. Limen Isidore gave me only a whispered hint of what it is, although he was head-over-hills with the future of the enterprise."

Hansel handed him a copy of the company brochure together with his own business card, and then hesitated for a while and tried to explain. He was very unprepared for this kind of question. Yet he must talk in a manner that would leave no doubt that he knew everything about the organization. For five minutes he spoke rather confusedly at times, and for five minutes Justice Nfor Nfor tried in vain to detect a convincing and coherent idea, even the concealed train of thought behind his jumbled flow of words.

"Sounds quite interesting," Justice Nfor Nfor said, nodding, thinking that perhaps, what the man was saying made real sense but he was too slow to follow his thoughts. But even Hansel himself sensed the flattery, for he knew he had not performed well, and that made him apprehensive, unsettled. He felt his heart quickening ominously.

"So, the long and short of it, Justice, is that I need a jurist of your calibre for the legal chaperoning of the whole exercise. I have a handful of lawyers and state counsels, but those have their limits. Justice, do you know how much it means to the reputation of this country when the Chinese study the organigram and find a man like you as legal adviser?"

Nfor Nfor smiled to himself and very imperceptibly glanced at his watch. But that slight act had not escaped the sharp notice of Hansel. He did not seem tickled by all the gibberish.

“You are retired, right, Mr. Justice?”

“Well, I am. But in this service you do not actually retire as such. Commissions prop up every now and then and I am called to head one or to be on the panel of the other. Once in a while I am in Arushia or in Kigali, or the Hague, on tribunals. So, you see that even when I am not officially in service, I am a very busy man. What were you thinking of? Buying my services or what?”

“Let me say I start by assigning you outright, four full shares...”

“How much is a share?”

“Five hundred thousand francs..”

“And then...”

Nfor raised a questioning brow.

When the name first crossed his mind, Hansel thought of inviting him and buying him over from whatever he was doing. But in the light of what noticed and was forced to conclude about the man within those few minutes, buying him was out of the question. With a rapidly flagging enthusiasm, he simply adjusted his thoughts and said:

“And then I give you 1000,000 francs each time we sit. How’s that for a start?”

“That could be interesting, and thanks so much for your generosity with the shares. How come I never heard of this your Scraps...”

“CRABS and SHELLS,” Hans hastened to correct him but without acknowledging the compliment. He was hurt by the fact that the man had not been struck with awe at the offer of four full shares worth two million francs. Surely he was not a man to use. He was instead a man to dread, to treat at a distance. It was a very grievous mistake to have got involved with him in the first place. The contact must not be allowed to go any further.

“With all due respect, can you give me some time to reflect on the offer? I take a look at the brochure, study the

magazine (which he picked up himself)” the man resumed. “As I said, it’s a very interesting thing to me and sounds very promising. With me, duty is sacred and when I accept to do something, I always put in 100% so that if it doesn’t work it would be easy for me to tell where the fault emanated from. And one way of ensuring this is to know exactly what I am supposed to do. How much does it cost to Bangui and back?”

It was a very harmless question, but in his guilt-ridden mind Hansel saw only treachery. It seemed to put Hansel so completely off that he hesitated unnecessarily and nervously before saying:

“I have to look that up again, am so forgetful.” Then after a second he enquired: “Why is justice asking all this?”

“Just for further information, no more no less,” Nfor Nfor said with a sudden feeling of unease. “That should tell me how much I would spend if I have to accompany you to Bangui to personally make an on-the-spot assessment of the situation.”

Once again, Hansel saw something else, something very sinister behind the answer. He fidgeted where he sat as if there were needles and pins under the seat of his trousers.

“It seems to give me the impression that Justice is suspicious of something.”

The man gave a long derisive laugh.

“How can that be? This is our very first business encounter. What could I be suspecting? Rather it is your questions that might make me suspicious. With me, let me insist, work is sacred. You will notice that it will turn out for the good for you, if you don’t know. When dealing with these so-called Multi-Nationals, you have to be on your guard. They are leaches pure and simple. They milk you dry for all you are worth and give you what usually amounts to mere chicken feed which you take with both hands...”

Hansel was not even listening, and the wind may have blown away the last words of the Justice. As far as he was concerned the tickling conversation was over. The anguish weighed on him like a bag of cement. With what pleasure he would have had some thug squeeze Nfor Nfor's crane-like neck, if only to see his piercing and accusing eyes and hear his grating voice no more, never again to make him look and feel so insignificant, mean and contemptible at a moment of his greatest glory!! His disappointment took the form of a quick flickering of his eyes round the room. Then in spite of himself he said, sighing a heavy sigh of undisguised frustration:

"Well, Justice, I am mighty glad you came down to see me and it was such a pleasure listening and talking to you. I only hope it will be possible at some future time for us to work together."

They shook hands and Hansel, finally glad to put an end to the anguish of listening to the man, accompanied him to the door, faking an insincere and prolonged and seemingly affectionate farewell. And as he departed, Hansel wished that some thunder would strike him dead in his track the very next minute. He warned himself for the last time, that this was not the kind of person he wanted to work with. He wanted desperate men, not men saturated with wealth, not a man who would not tremble at the mention of four million francs. It was an error which shouldn't repeat itself.

"Justice my foot," Hans cursed. "Let him be doubly damned."

From this moment Hans knew that it was a matter of time before the balloon would burst. But while it lasted, for now, it had to float higher and higher. But, try as he could, it was impossible to eliminate Nfor Nfor from his mind and, every time he thought of the man, extraordinary currents of guilt stirred within his whole being. He was sensitively aware of the frightening fact that Nfor Nfor was a jurist of

such standing that it sufficed for him to indicate to the authorities that he suspected something amiss with the Crabs company and he would be behind bars immediately, and for life. That feeling made him extremely wretched. At unguarded moments as, for example, when he was falling asleep, something he scarcely did, the scene in his office that day and the terribly aching questions and suggestions would flash back and forth to him, with renewed vividness and he would find himself perspiring and sighing and swearing in the dark, alone. He would see the man of law questioning him suspiciously, his piercing looks which seemed to bring out the animal in him and make him want to contemplate murder as the only alternative left for him. *For his own good, all causes shall give way*, he thought.

On his part, Justice Nfor resisted the urge that was creeping in his mind to suspect something amiss in the organization. The fact that Limen Isidore had spoken to him about it was enough to convince him that it was a genuine and profitable endeavour. However, he felt uncomfortable with the thought that Hansel should be suspicious of a suggestion that was so natural, that was made without any second thought.

Chapter Seventeen

Members of the Inner Circle of Investors – those who owned 10 shares and more, now numbered about 40, after only a few months' operation. At the instigation of Limen Isidore, when they got their first quarter dividends paid out to them, they decided on their own to throw a small party at which they would toast Hans with Champagne for their good fortune and as a sign of gratitude. The organisers included:

Madam Genevieve Efa – Happy Widows Association, Cranford Metuge (proxy for OIC Manager), Godfred Mukulu Fosso (Customs Inspector), Edmund Fru Merienghe (Highways), Limen Isidore (President of CLUB 49), Rosita Ambi Frifri (proxy for Government Delegate of Bamenda Urban Council), Nkwain Bob Joe (proxy for Prov. Treasurer), Langmia Sylvanus (THS storekeeper), Sancho Sancho Tobiasis (Dossiers man), Maurice Agemndia (Transporter), Fombalang Fidelis Fofum (Principal Midweek Bilingual), Ashi Tibong Fabrice (proxy for the Colonel of the Gendarmerie), Fenton Mengue(proxy for the Secretary General of the Province), Nyenti Obeng Kangsing (Manger of Texaco), Titus Mbong (Drivers' Union), Ange Susan Anye (Provincial Delegate for Mines and Power), Augustine Fuetngwa (Manager of Central Post Office), Achuonta Victor Chamba (Transporter), Mobung Ngong Eunice (Business woman), Cosmas Amang Shulem Wara (Taxation Department).

The party took place at the Ayaba Hotel, in the *boukaro* overlooking the tennis court. The choice of Ayaba Hotel with its thirty-seven suites, was ideal and the fact that they had been given the permission at all, spoke volumes of the respect with which the organization was viewed. Ayaba Hotel was a state-owned facility, a five-star hotel in which all important Government events are held. Some guests were loitering around the swimming pool and conversing, comparing the splendour of the hotel and its premises, well-kept lawns and appetising meals, with the ramshackled and tottering structures of Old Town just across the street, looking jealously at the hotel, it reminded the inhabitants of Old Town of their misery, the impossibility of ever getting out of the slime and poverty of the slums, eyeing the eminent structure like a discouraged athlete at the foot of a mountain. Others were watching tennis: in one court a certain woman with heavy buttocks and fleshy legs was molesting a thin gentleman, drilling him up and down, making him fall, rise again and run, fall again and, rising, played the ball into the net to everybody's delight.

"I cannot allow myself to be humiliated like that," one of the guests whom everybody addressed "Pa Chamba" said.

"It's just for exercise," his companion said.

"The person who needs exercise is that fatima woman, not the boy," Pa Chamba pointed out.

"But the boy does not know enough to make the woman run around, so he has to suffer," the other man said.

On Court Two, the Club Coach was teaching another woman with abnormally heavy breasts to serve. He would bounce the ball in front of him three or four times, throw the ball up above his head while he arched his body and threw the racket behind him and swing forward, striking the ball into the opponent's side. The woman would bounce the ball all right, toss it into the air correctly, arch her body and swing the racket, but would either miss the ball completely or strike it into the fence on her own side.

"I cannot bear to come and ridicule myself like that," Pa Chamba said again.

"That's the problem with all beginners," his good friend said. "Watch her after a few months, and you will not believe."

Pa Achamba would not believe.

"How can she improve when she does not even see the ball? All she sees is the fence."

The guest of honour arrived. Resplendent in a dark green suit that he had bought only for the occasion, the little man looked like something out of the Oxindales Catalogue of old. The blue shirt inside matched the green coat so well. A golden chain hung from his right wrist, a golden watch on his left wrist, all glittering in the fast-descending sunlight. He wore dark green pointed shoes to match his suit and dark stockings, slightly tinted spectacles. He looked every inch the Managing-Director of **Crabs and Shells** which the men had come to honour.

As if by a premeditated plan but purely by accident, the guests immediately pulled themselves into two groups, forming a living avenue down which Hans strode amidst greet cheers, extravagant and effusive praises. He was described in the newspapers as the man who was going to make the wealth of Alhadji Djaguda (a famous billionaire cattle dealer in the extreme north of the country), look like child's play, the Cameroon Rockefeller, the Cameroon Abiola et al.

A master of the cryptic, Hans allowed the praise singer to finish, then, holding up a bottle of Champagne he said:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to success. We are in the high tide and...."

He was interrupted by a servant dressed in sparkling white hotel outfit who with trembling hands held out a silver tray to him. On it there was a sheet of paper folded once and clipped with a pen.

“What is it? Is it a summons? Did you people not obtain permission to use this hotel?” he joked.

“No summons, Monsieur,” the servant said with exquisite politeness, “fax mail, is fax mail, Monsieur.”

There was a hush as his fingers seemed to tremble in the process of stretching out the document. Actually his secretary had received the mail, had followed him to Ayaba Hotel and had insisted that the waiter should deliver it to him.

“Who told them that I was here that they wouldn’t permit me to relax with my people even for one minute. This damn Bangui thing!”

“They said they have been phoning and were told you would be at a meeting here, Monsieur.”

There were sighs of relief when he lifted his head and said, “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. Pass this head ache round.”

There was alarm wherever the last line was read: OUTRE-MER, the famous French company operating in most Franco-phone Africa, was offering to buy Hansel out of the Chinese deal for the unbelievable, mouth-watering sum of 2 billion francs. The big question was:

“Prince, what then becomes of our shares? Are you going to sell it and we share the proceeds or something?” The man was talking and sniffing the aroma of food in the kitchen. They had also ordered two goats to be slaughtered and an assortment of fruits and dishes, both European and African.

Hans told the story of a man who had a goose which laid him a golden egg every morning. And the man lived comfortable with the one golden egg a day until his son, deciding to own all the golden eggs, killed the goose and found nothing inside.

“Cheers, Ladies and gentlemen. We did not obtain permission from OUTRE-MER before we set this up, they cannot then ask to buy us out. I will buy them out. First thing, they insist on a reply, there’s no proof that I got the letter.”

“This gentleman is the best thing that has happened to this country since independence,” an excited shareholder said, pointing at Prince Hans who was surrounded by newsmen. The people cheered. As they drank on and on, Hans sipping only his champagne, somebody wanted to know how seriously to take the threat from OUTRE-MER.

“It is a business proposal pure and simple, as far as I am concerned. I know that there was an agreement between the Chinese and the Bangui authorities that in the event of the Crabs winding up, their business would be taken over by OUTRE-MER, who should be the first to know. The French Government should be the first to know because it controls the economy and politics of Franco-phone Africa. They control the politics and economy of Cameroon. They own the cement, timber and aluminum and extracting industries...But Crabs Bangui is not winding up. It is merely expanding its tentacles into Cameroon. In his closing remarks Hans drew attention to the sacrifices he was making to ensure that shareholders got maximum satisfaction from their investments, and called on them all to be equally committed to the welfare of the company. As he looked round implying that there was nothing else to talk about he caught a sideways glance of a tall figure stalking him from the right. A slight and gentle turn to the right and his eyes met those of the one man he would never have wanted to meet at a moment of such happiness. Retired Justice Nfor Nfor waved to him.

It was as if he had seen the ghost of a deadly enemy. Out of sheer fright the glass of wine dropped from his hand onto the tiled floor and broke into smithereens, spattering the bits and wine on the shoes and trousers of the guests. Two servants made their appearance instantly and began to mop the floor and gather the pieces while another replaced the glass. Meeting Nfor Nfor again was a nightmare. It was as if he had actually walked into the police dragnet. As a

matter of fact, the man had been invited to the event by a friend of his who was also a shareholder and who had been making an attempt to win Nfor Nfor over. Thus his presence was even a plus for the company.

But Hansel saw it in a different and disturbing light. His feelers had already reported back to him and he had caught the drift of emotions as far as sending a fact-finding mission to Bangui was concerned. Hans knew better than to discourage the idea openly, which cut right into the heart of his very existence. He would stave it off for as long as it takes. But for the moment it must look like it was indeed his own idea. In his final concluding remarks charged with a high voltage sincerity and charm that endeared him to the members all the more, he said there were only two major things to do now or in the nearest future. First, the Inner Circle Members, the 40 chartered stockholders in the syndicate should be thinking of going to Bangui in turns and ascertaining for themselves what exactly was happening.

Many people thought the idea was excellent and were looking forward to it. This was for the personal consumption of Justice Nfor Nfor who was so disarmed that he was amongst the very first persons to say 'no'. After they had talked in his office some time ago, information filtered into Hansel's ears that the judge, instead of keeping his reflections to himself, had been cornering and buttonholing shareholders and talking to them about the Bangui project. He did not appear to have been satisfied by the fact that every member he met spoke in glowing terms about Hansel's business acumen and generous dividends and the large returns they were making every month on their investments. When to the question as to how many of them had been to see the site and personally size up its worth, he got no answer, he told those who cared to listen that that was the wrong way of doing business, even if they were making huge returns on their investments.

To make matters worse, Justice Nfor Nfor came up to Hansel and greeted, apparently unaware of the fact that it was his presence that had caused all the commotion.

“Ah, Justice,” Hansel switched gaiety into his embarrassment. “Long time no see. How have things been with you? I have been waiting to hear from you as we agreed.”

“Ya, Mr. Director. I am close to a decision. One of these days we will be talking. You can see that I am here with my good old friend, Victor, even without your inviting me. A good sign.” He lifted his glass and the show went on. The reason he looked more relaxed with Hansel now although Hansel saw in him only a standing accusation, was because of a cat and mouse game he was engaged in. He had written to the Crabs and Shells Organization using the e-mail address he had copied from the brochure. The letter was addressed to a certain Lee Ping Yung and it sought amongst several other worries, to know how serious the organization was and whether there was no risk involved in putting in one’s money in shares. The e-mail, of course, ended up in Hansel’s mail box. Anxious to be in Nfor Nfor’s good books he had replied to the mail as best he could, telling him fabulous tales about the future of the project. He expected Nfor Nfor to come running after him after reading the letter, but the jurist did not. Why? What could the man be planning?

The guest of honour was led to the dining table where Limen Isidore had put up a humorous notice: “CUT YOUR GOAT ACCORDING TO YOUR SIZE.” After the guest of honour’s closing remarks people began to filter away until just a handful were left.

Chapter Eighteen

The day ended on a very tragic note. At about 8 o'clock when everybody had virtually dispersed, a customer at the bar looking through the transparent walls thought she saw somebody drop into the pool.

"For a while I thought it was a late night customer who just decided to get a dip. But as I looked on it appeared to me that the man was appearing and disappearing, and that he seemed to be wearing a coat. That was when I called the waiter and drew his attention to it."

The worker ran up in panic to the few remaining guests who were about to board their cars and reported that a member of their group had slipped and fallen into the swimming pool. They ran back, horror-stricken to see an old man struggling to hold on to the embankment and climb out, only to slip and fall again. The drowning man was Pa Victor Achuonta Chamba whom some would remember, had finished a Champagne all by himself.

There were no swimmers amongst them. The hotel had a resident rescue service, but this was especially active only when children came to the pool, and that was during the day. By some stroke of misfortune, the man had fallen into the very deep end of the swimming pool where only swimmers of very great experience could reach. One or two persons who could not swim that much tried to save the drowning man but he almost went down with them. Rescuing a drowning man requires a lot of skill and experience. Thus, all that could be done was to run round the pool screaming for help. Somebody threw in the inflated inner tube of some very big vehicle in the hope that he

would catch it and hang on to it and be dragged to safety. He did not even see it. He had already sunk to the bottom of the pool and bubbles could be seen rising on the surface of the water above the area where he was.

Hans returned to the pool and was once again surprised to find Justice Nfor standing over the helpless Chamba. He had just learnt as he was leaving the hotel premises that it was thanks to Chamba's persuasion that Nfor Nfor had attended the party. He had not finished working out in his mind how he would corner Chamba the very next day to know how much he knew about the movements of Nfor Nfor. The latter looked very disturbed by what had happened to his old friend. But his presence at the party and by Chamba's side gave Hansel a clue to something that had puzzled him. In an earlier informal meeting, Chamba had moved a motion to the effect that a delegation must be sent as soon as possible to Bangui to ascertain the state of things. That showed the influence of Nfor Nfor's doctrine.

Help eventually came in the form of a young teacher who had been an instructor in swimming at the hotel some years ago. He managed to pull the old man out, but by that time he was not only exhausted, but had taken in a large quantity of the water. While the young swimmer tried to administer some first aid to the man Hans made a call to the hospital. He started vomiting right away, his eyes popping out of his head. He was in a totally helpless state.

Nfor Nfor personally called the Director of the General Hospital who showed up himself with an ambulance within a few minutes and they took Pa Chamba away. Hansel was immediately contacted and he wasted no time in driving to the hospital to see for himself. Pa Chamba was a very valuable asset to the company because it was his presence very early that was single-handedly responsible for the enrolment of about ten other persons of quality. He was the first member of what now became known as the Inner Circle of the Company, people who had ten shares or more.

It was established that Pa Chamba had suffered a concussion which had instantly resulted in massive internal haemorrhage that might cause death at any time. In fact, the old man was unconscious when he was pulled out of the pool, and never regained consciousness. He died overnight, in his sleep.

Always ready to turn anything into his own advantage, Hans saw in this event an opportunity to advertise his business more and more. There was only one very serious problem, Justice Nfor Nfor seemed to be directly involved in the funeral arrangements for, as it turned out, he and the deceased were childhood pals. This discovery compelled Hansel to do more than he would ordinarily have done for Chamba, in a bid to impress Nfor Nfor and encourage him to join the fold, or at least, not to betray him as he feared every minute. The sudden death of Chamba was a very bad sign because it had deprived Hansel of the sole person through whom he would have kept watch on Nfor Nfor's movements. To worsen matters, whether it was the loss of his friend or whatever ideas he must have gathered or formed about Hansel, Nfor Nfor did not seem to be in a mood to talk to him, he avoided Hansel at the slightest opportunity, thereby aggravating his misery. He seemed to treat Hansel with a lot of contempt, in spite of his expert showmanship.

Pa Chamba was not a poor man by any standards. In addition to friends in high office like Justice Nfor Nfor, his company had the monopoly of transporting goods from Nigeria through Ekok to Bamenda, through Widikum. He had a fleet of freight hauling trucks that made him a fortune primarily because his trucks could travel with a heavy overload and not be stopped and fined by the Highways and then his road-construction firm, with lucrative state contracts, repaired the damage wrought. It was the kind of operation that would warm any businessman's heart, business of itself creating business. He himself used to describe his activities as "roundabout bisnet."

Chamba had left behind an enormous wealth, but Hans declared that because he was an important member of the company, CRABS AND SHELLS was to be responsible for the funeral arrangements, an offer which the family welcomed with open hands. Mufflers and paper napkins bearing the insignia of the company were manufactured almost overnight. Crab members all wore black suits with yellow company badges. The only item that did not bear the insignia of the company was the coffin itself.

First he got in touch with BAZOR FUNERAL SERVICES. Enlisting the services of BAZOR automatically implied that the funeral was going to be a grandiose event. BAZOR was the most popular and most efficient setup for mourning and burying the dead. They provided coffins which many people exaggerated by saying they were equipped with mobile phones. And they had a team of young mourners who could draw tears from the hardest heart. The mourners were often so well dressed that they looked more like entertainers. Then, the orchestra, it was of such superb that people are known to have followed them for days to funerals of persons they knew nothing about, only to listen to the music. In this particular case BAZOR played his wonderful music at the all-night wake-keeping and was to take the coffin after the mass in church, to its final resting place at Kinigang village, a distance of about 60 kilometres but which could take days, on account of the poor and rocky nature of the terrain.

The programme was read over the Provincial radio station every few hours: "Friday night, wake keeping at deceased man's residence in Monkam Street; nine o'clock, church service at the Holy Fathers' Cathedral; eleven o'clock departure for Kinigang; twelve o'clock laying in state in his village residence; three o'clock, church service at the Kinigang community church; four o'clock, burial, five o'clock entertainment and departure of guests. By five o'clock when the mourners were supposed to be feasting and returning to

Bamenda, the vehicle carrying the coffin had not made beyond twenty kilometres. Frustrated, many people returned, after they had tried unsuccessfully to convince the family to bury the man anywhere in the forest. It was said that there was even more disappointment in the village where jujus had danced until they removed their masks. Food already prepared ran cold. The burial which took place only the next day was devoid of the pomp and pageantry that had been prepared for it the previous day. It turned out to be a shameful burial, out of all proportion to his immense popularity and wealth.

The church services at All Saints was memorable and glorious: The priest, Reverend Father Jonas, his tongue sharpened and loosened by the sight of dark suits and potbellies, implying that the collection would be really much, spoke for close to two hours and about the pleasure of dying, of dying in Christ. During offering as the mass boys who had gone round with the baskets returned to place them under the altar, he rose from where he sat and took the baskets behind the altar after having inspected the contents with a smile of satisfaction.

“To go to heaven, dear brothers and sisters,” he shouted, perspiration running down his cheeks, “you have first to die. Let all of and the bereaved family rejoice that our brother has taken the very first step towards heaven.” And so on until the congregation was relieved to answer “Amen” when his fiery sermon finally came to an end.

There were very few eulogies: his first son from America spoke, the president of the Transporters’ Union spoke and then Hansel, the unofficial and self-appointed M.C. made a brief but touching speech in which he reprimanded death for behaving like a thief:

“You hide your head when a man is labouring until when it is time to harvest, you show up and take away life,” he said. “If Crabs and Shells is anything today, it is this great

man lying here that gave me the idea. But he is not alive today to harvest with me. In the words of the great poet Longfellow,

*Lives of great men all remind us
We too can make our lives sublime.
And departing, leave behind us
Footprints in the sands of time.*

Although membership to the Inner Circle of our organization is exclusive and not transferable, I take great exception in this particular case. Our comrade's next-of-kin will automatically step into his shoes and continue if he so desires, or he can withdraw his capital investment if he so desires. But, as our constitution requires, the widow is still entitled to the condolence envelope of 750,000 francs."

There was a very long applause, in spite of the fact that they were in church, and at a funeral mass.

Hans had very deftly achieved several things at once. He had advertised his business in the best way possible, such that those well-to-do people who were still fence-sitting saw that there was a definite advantage in belonging to it. Here was a very closely-knit organization that catered not only for the living but also for the dead. The upshot of all this showcasing was that in two weeks following the burial of Pa Victor Achuonta Chamba, the enrolment increased by 65 new members, not a bad bargain. But, Nfor Nfor was still not one of them.

Then the procession took off with the corpse on a hearse on four wheels. Chamba's grand children, eleven in number, led the way, carrying wreaths that threatened to throw them to the ground, chattering and smiling to each other as if they were in a concert. Then followed the man's eight children, his two sons from America, the other three from Germany, and his four daughters all clad in black in a

genuinely mourning mood; then came their mother, the widow from whose feet grief had taken away the courage and strength to stand, actually hanging between two strong-armed relatives as though suffering from some paralysis, unable to contain her loss, sobbing endlessly, screaming and inviting tears down the cheeks of all around her of weak heart. The hearse, immediately followed by the Crabs team ranged on both sides of the coffin, Justice Nfor Nfor and other family friends, and then everybody else.

At the edge of the floor at the porch which ended in six low steps, the Crabs team lifted the coffin from the hearse and carried it to the waiting Bazor surrounded by its team of eight boys, all clad in black with top hats.

Chapter Nineteen

During the month following the burial of Chamba, Hansel made another urgent and memorable trip to Bangui and on his return brought back a red pickup truck for the company, fully *immatriculated* with the name and insignia of the company on each of the two front doors. It was not directly from the shop but looked like new and at least new enough to give the impression that the company was doing extremely fine. He found, not surprisingly, that his dear Salomey had caught the CRABS AND SHELLS bug! She came to him with 1,500,000 francs to buy three shares in the company. The money was made up of her own spare savings, those of his small G.Y.Y. Ex-students' Union, and a loan from the Azire Credit Union.

For a whole minute Hansel was wordless rather than silent. He had no language in which to express the whole truth about the company. How was he to tell her the truth without losing his self-esteem? In the end he decided to lose money and keep the secret, secret.

"Write out a receipt for yourself for this amount," he told her. When she had done so, he counted the money and returned to her without taking anything out. "I do not want you to invest a single franc in this affair. Your emotional capital is enough for me. Although everything looks so bright and rosy now, this bubble may not remain so forever. If and when it ends, I wouldn't want two of us to weep or regret. That's why I say you should keep your money. Show the receipt to your friends, but make sure you pay back the debts you owe without delay. Any other problems, let me know so that we thrash."

Then he told Salomey:

“God’s time is the best. Our people say when your man is up the plum tree, you can be sure that you will eat the blackest and the best ones. Now that things are going so well, I want you to do a good number of things for yourself, and do so very fast before they turn sour again. I have some money which I think will be enough to give you a small Toyota car. I will give you a cheque two million francs here and now with which you will use to shop around. And while all that is happening, look for a plot in a convenient position and let me know. There is nothing that would please me more than visiting you in a house you call your own, constructed according to your taste.”

Outside, the pressure was just as high. He could not stand the anguish and jealousy of those friends and relatives who had not been admitted into the exclusive Club. There were those who were begging to enter and pay for their shares but were denied that chance. Hansel had the same problem, to refuse and be safe or tell them the truth and be damned. He preferred to be damned. There were those who did not have enough money to buy shares and their cry was that he should bring down the cost of the shares. These people were so many that in the end Hansel capitulated and decided to broaden the base of membership, but within limits. Rather than bring down the cost of a share he encouraged groups to come together and buy a few shares.

The people wanted a piece of the luscious Bangui cake which Hansel seemed determined to enjoy alone. That was not going to be, they resolved.

One week after his return from Bangui, he told his wife:

“You have been asking me what I brought from Bangui for you, here it is. Close your eyes tight and open your hands.”

She did and when she next opened them there was a ring holding two keys.

“What is this?”

He held her hand and led her to a beautiful starlet parked at the entrance into their compound. “That’s for you,” Hansel said.

Marion was overjoyed and wept. She entered the car and would not leave. The children, each of whom now wanted a car, joined her and they almost spent the night in it. Marion immediately registered in a driving school and she was so anxious to drive that within two months she could do her shopping on her own. But that did not deter her from her farming. She would pack her farming tools in the boot and drive the boys off to the farm every Saturday morning.

Chapter Twenty

The idyllic life interrupted by the dismissal from the bank continued unabated until one day an enemy broke through Hansel's defences, or rather, the scales fell from his wife's eyes, peeling off that veneer of respectability and uxoriousness to expose him as a most unfaithful husband.

It began like a joke several months earlier. One day after they had returned from playing at the ropes at the NIRVANA RESORT, Jessica told her mother very casually:

"Mummy, we saw two boys at the swing today who looked exactly like us."

The woman smiled. "People do resemble each other," she told the little girl and went about her work. "How do you know that they resemble you?"

The little girl looked disappointed that she could not explain, and even more disappointed that her mother had thrown away her discovery so mindlessly. The following day it was Perdita's turn. She told her mother about the two children they had met who resembled them very much.

"How do you know that they resemble you?" she asked.

"I know mummy, I know how my face looks like, I know how my sister's face looks like too. They really resembled us."

"Did you talk to them?"

"Jessica talked to them."

"And what did they say?"

"They only laughed."

"Do you know them?"

"I don't know where they live, but if I see them I will know."

“Did you talk to your dad about them?”

“No, daddy was inside the big hall playing with the fishes in the glass box.”

“When next you go there and see them, tell your dad, you hear?”

“Yes, mummy.”

The following Sunday when they returned from NIRVANA RESORT, their mother asked them:

“Did you see those your brothers today?”

They all denied.. But some three Sundays afterwards, just when the episode was beginning to fade from Marion’s memory the boys reported again having seen the two boys.

“Did you tell your daddy?” Marion asked again.

“We did, but daddy was just laughing. He even told us to be friendly with the boys.”

Thereafter the boys were never heard of again until one day when they were going to the market, Perdita ran up to her mother and told her she had just seen the two boys again. Marion followed her hurriedly but stood at a distance to look at them. The resemblance was remarkable. Her daughters were so absorbed in the two boys that they did not notice that the mother of the children or at least the woman they were walking with, was their father’s finance clerk, the cashier of **Crabs and Shells**, the woman who had been introduced to her by, she had forgotten who, and for whom she had solicited help from her husband. She refused to entertain the remote thought of a possible infidelity on the part of her husband, which began to steal its way into the deepest recesses of his mind.

Chapter Twenty One

The epoch-making letter from China which catapulted Hansel into the pinnacle of fame and wealth came in on the 15th of August 2001. Hansel had yielded to Salomey's persuasion and had promised to be a church goer thereafter. Two weeks after that he had kept his word and had gone to church, to his wife's utter dismay but happiness. He had followed up this new life by yielding to one his wife's repeated urges, that they should attend A MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER. This was a world famous event that was believed to lubricate and cement the relationship between married couples, a miracle drug, so to speak, that rejuvenated stale or half-broken marriages, and spiced new ones.

Over the years Hansel's response to her plea had been the same: it was not a Reverend Father – major officials at the event were usually priests - that was going to teach him how to run his marital home. His marriage was doing just fine and he had often received full marks from his wife, while his wife had often told him how other couples admired their relationship. He loved his children, was doing well in his job and was generally admired by people who came across him.

Whether he had other ideas up his sleeves, nobody could tell. What was important to Marion was that he had finally agreed to go.

The next Marriage Encounter was to take place at Futru parish, and the prestigious Pastoral Centre Upstation. It was to take place on Friday the 3rd November and was to last till Sunday afternoon. The two of them, Hansel and his spouse looked forward to it with feverish expectations. On

that long awaited day they were expected at Futru at 5pm. By noon Hansel was already home and packing, he knew not what since both of them were strangers to the event. At any rate he took along a pair of pyjamas, a jogging suit, a couple of inner wears, a tooth brush, a pair of slippers and his towel. The wife too put together what she thought they would require there. At 4.30pm they were already at Futru parish. About thirty other couples were present but it was Hansel's presence that caused a great stir, especially because many of his wife's friends had not stopped congratulating her for causing the husband to go church for the very first time within living memory. They hugged and embraced Hansel and his wife and almost shook their hands out the sockets.

And then they were led to their rooms by older members of the event who had given them the invitation to attend. The rooms had been constructed with the greatest economy and they looked like rooms in the army barracks: oblong, with an external toilet where you needed to carry water from a drum to flush your stool because, as they were told, water pressure was extremely low except early in the mornings. The beds were hardly a metre wide but long enough to accommodate very tall people. They would learn later that the choice of such narrow beds was deliberate because the whole idea of Marriage Encounter was to bring couples close to each other, and there was no better place to make couples feel each other's heart beat than on a narrow bed. Supper was a scanty meal 'jollof' rice, some bread and broiled Irish potatoes. Upon the assumption that couples would be too tired the very first night, nothing much happened that night beyond introducing them to the environment and new friends.

The actual opening ceremony took place the following Saturday morning at nine in the conference Room which had been introduced to them the previous night. On the

panel was a priest, Rev. Father Menda Fidelis who acted as the moderator, and a couple, Mr and Mrs Etienne Mancho. Each member of the panel spoke with a hand lying over the should of the other, an indication that they were bound to each other by love. Hansel wondered what the hell the priest's role in the event involving married couples. But he would soon see that he too declared that he was married – to Jesus, married to his faith. Even more than that, he spoke about his tribulations in his marital life with his calling in virtually the same manner that the couple spoke about their marital problems.

At the closing of the event on Sunday morning, the coordinator appealed to the participants for financial assistance after reading a comprehensive list of the expenses.

A basket was sent round for people to make modest contributions. Hansel, ignoring the basket dipped his left hand into his breast pocket and gave Marion a bundle of money. When the financial secretary counted the money she exclaimed before closing her mouth with her right palm: Hansel had made “a modest” contribution of 300,000 francs. Compelled by the coordinator to say a word about his impressions of this Original Weekend that he had offered such an unprecedented support, Hansel said:

“I have enjoyed every minute of my stay here and I will spread the good news to key members of my organization, CRABS AND SHELLS Before I came here I was convinced that my married life had nothing else to learn and that we were doing just fine. But I leave this place today knowing that even the best jet planes require lubrication once in a while. I make a promise that as Managing Director I am going to cause key members of my company to be part of this thing during the next weekend.”

It was noted down by the secretary as the understatement of the century, and the applause was thunderous, reflecting exactly how much they appreciated the gesture.

A day after they arrived, it had been announced that there would be a priest in the chapel to receive participants for confession. It was important to confess all your sins before beginning that new page in their lives, the announcer had added. The confessional was designed to cleanse them of all past evils and prepare a fertile ground for the new seeds of love to grow. Fred had been one of the first to go in. Marion had gone in later. In the morning of the day of the closing ceremony too, there had taken place a church service in which all the couples had renewed their marriage vows. Every session closed with The Encounter Anthem: THERE'S A NEW WORLD SOMEWHERE

Chapter Twenty Two

After seeing the children for herself, perspiration burst in every pore on her face and she had to hurry the children home. At home, and in a state of mind dithering towards mental breakdown, she began to see her husband in a different light. She refused to believe what her every emotion was pointing towards, that those children might after all, be Hansel's children, and that Salomey may after all be Hansel's Paramour. That afternoon she went to see her old friend Appolonia, the lady who first suggested the idea of the MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER to her. She told the story and enlisted her services for further investigation. In a couple of days Appolonia concluded her findings, the result was what Marion never wanted to hear, Madam Salomey was the mother of the two boys, twins, and Hansel was their father.

For five days her sleep was cut down to just a few minutes after going to bed. The rest of the nights were spent tracking down and killing mosquitoes, sighing ceaselessly and tossing from side to side until, mercifully, the cocks began to crow, the church bells began to chime and day broke. She read her husband's PRIME TIME dialogue notebook over and over again. PRIME TIME DIALOGUE was a period of about twenty minutes each couple was encouraged to select everyday during which they exchanged responses in the form of love letters, on suggested topics. A spouse was required to open his or her heart and point out failings in the other, while revealing what she or he felt as the strong points of the other, and what he or she loved in the other. As she looked back on that exercise, she recalled that there had

never been a topic on which the two of them differed.. The way the letters were composed, they were meant for each other. At the end of each exercise the couple rated each other over ten. Hansel always scored a ten while Marion scarcely scored up to eight. Therefore, she could not, by any stretch of the imagination, reconcile the expression of Hansel's deep and undivided love for her that exuded from every letter with what she was learning.

Yet, the rumour continued to stare her in the eyes and cast a dark shadow over her future as his loyal wife. For how long was she to endure such suffering, she asked herself a thousand times and more. That day she decided to take the bull by the horns. She saw no reason why she should condemn her innocent self to a lifetime of insomnia and restlessness while the real criminal was sleeping comfortably and moving the streets freely.

Early the next morning she rang up Appolonia and the two took a taxi to confront Salomey. As they drove along, Marion wondered aloud:

"Let this thing be a lie.. If a man who looks good, so devoted to his wife and family turns out to be a cheat, what would we expect from rascals who never care a thing about their families?"

"I find it hard to believe too," Appolonia responded. "Let's just wait and see. Let's just pray that thee is an error of judgement somewhere, and that the real truth would be different."

Marion handed to Appolonia her husband's PRIME TIME DIALOGUE notebook. After going through three love letters Appolonia shook her head sadly.

"That is why I cannot understand what we are hearing, my dear friend." She recalled how quickly and perfectly Hansel recited the anthem of the ENCOUNTER, which he sang alone when they prayed every morning, since she herself was still struggling with a few lines.

"This man is always at home, my friend. When do they meet?" she wondered.

Salomey was home preparing to go to drop the boys off to school and proceed to work at the CRABS Head Office. The two boys were already dressed but were still brushing their teeth at the veranda. Marion gave each of them a motherly pat on the back as she studied them ever more closely.

"Where is mummy?" Appolonia asked.

"In the house," one of the boys said while the other ran in calling: "Mummy, mummy." Salomey pulled the drapes to one side and peered through the louvres. Something broke inside her and she collapsed into her sofa where she paused for a few minutes before rising to answer both the son and the doorbell.

"Good morning, Madam Salomey," Marion greeted when she pulled the door ajar.

"Good morning madam," Salomey answered with great trepidation. "Please come in and sit down," she tried to be polite, her every nerve militating against composure.

Marion walked in, followed by her friend and the two of them sat together in a large armchair.

"Can I help you, Madam?" Salomey asked, looking only at Appolonia. Appolonia looked at Marion and then Marion, her eyes reddening with grief asked, subduing a sob:

"Do you know me, Madam Salomey?"

It was what Salomey had feared. "I know you, Madam. You are the wife of my boss."

Marion smiled to herself, it was actually a sneer. She opened her handbag and pulled out what Salomey thought was a gun, but it was a piece of paper in an envelope. It was her marriage certificate.

“Your boss, Mr. Hansel Bolingo Motombo, is my husband, my legally married husband, this is the legal document. Whatever you have been doing with him for the past ten years, it has been illegal, very very illegal. These two children looking at us like this, they are my husband’s sperms. My husband pays for this house in which you are living, and he does that every month, a married man, with grown children. That is not correct. Madam Salomey, you are a woman, how would you feel if you discovered that another woman was cheating on you to this extent, making a complete fool of you?”

Salomey took in a very long breath. She tried to speak, words stuck in her throat.

“For your own good, Madam Salomey, let it end here. The provocation of working in my husband’s office is too much for anybody to bear with any amount of patience. Let it not be said that I killed a woman. When next I come here, Madam Salomey, I will be coming with the women of this town, the women who want to protect and own their husbands against vipers like you. Good bye.”

Salomey sat brooding over the exposure in frozen silence until the door opened and shut behind the women. As they went back home, all the adages they learnt in school came back to her mind with stunning force: IF GOLD RUSTS, WHAT WILL IRON DO?; THERE IS NO ART TO FIND THE MIND’S CONSTRUCTION IN THE FACE, etc etc.

Chapter Twenty Three

That day Salomey did not report for work and did not call her boss to say she would not be coming and why. When Hansel phoned her at ten that morning she said:

“When we meet I shall tell you why,” and hung up.

Towards the end of the day Hansel locked up his office and drove to her house to find out why she was absent.

For the first time in more than ten years in love, Salomey received him with morose silence, with gloomy eyes and a darkened forehead. As soon as Hansel had found himself a seat she began: “You have dug a deep hole for me, and I do not see how I can get out of it.”

Hansel looked her up and down and remained silent, nonplussed. A tremor of sheer horror passed over him like the prospects of annihilation, his heart quickened with fear of the unknown. He let his chin sink upon his chest, stretched out his legs, stared broodingly and blankly through the drawn curtains. Then he asked: “What is happening?”

“The secret of our relationship has been exposed...”

“No,” he exclaimed, wishing by heaven that it should be only an error of judgment on her own part.

“Yes,” she said.

“By whom?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she confessed.

“Then what makes you think so?”

“Your wife was here this morning with a certain lady to attack me. She knows that the two boys are your children, she also knows that you pay my rents for this house, and that we have been friends for ten years.”

His heart jumped and he spoke hesitatingly, with quavering anxiety: "Listen, Salomey, let me get this straight, did she say that or you merely concluded from what she said that that was the case?"

"Am not a baby. Those were her words."

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say? I was so shocked that I could not find the words to try to defend myself."

"And what did she do next?"

"She went away with her friend."

"Who was that friend? Anybody I know?"

"I don't know whether you know her, but I don't remember meeting her before."

"So what do you plan to do now?"

"I was waiting for you to tell you about it before taking any action. But the first thing is that I shall never again set foot in your office."

"Is that what she said or you are just..."

"That's my decision. Secondly, I must leave this town..."

"To where?"

"I don't know where, anywhere. I just cannot live with the scandal which I see brewing up around me."

Hansel felt the blood rise behind his ears in rapid surging waves and he trembled all over with agitation and the exertion of keeping himself upright, to behave like the man that he was.

"Don't take any rash decision yet, until I have met Marion, until I see how she is reacting to it. This is a severely tempting situation and we must go about it with very great caution."

When Hansel got out he entered his car through the passenger's door and for five minutes he did not find his steering. He was just about to raise an alarm when his mind cleared a little and he was able to realize his folly and get out and reenter through the right door. He barely made it to

the house because he drove as if the car had no steering, as if he turned all the corners by an effort of will, not by turning the steering as required.

Marion was home when Hansel returned to his house. She did not answer his greetings and did not turn to look at him. She sensed that Hansel must have gone to Salomey or that they must have met and that she must have told him of her confrontation that morning. Realising all at once with a great flood of bitterness that he had committed an unforgivable offence, Marion did not allow Hansel to settle down, she went straight for the kill with a forthright accusation:

“For how long have you known Madam Salomey?”

There was a shocked momentary silence. It needed only a question like this to complete the misery of the day he had had. In office, thoughts about Justice Nfor Nfor had consumed his day. He found it hard to understand how a mere retired Chief Justice should so insistently occupy his thinking. It was absurd that he should be concerned by what the justice might be thinking or planning to do to him. What justification did he have for harbouring such upsetting thoughts? But, try as he could, he would not rid his muddled mind of the visit he had paid him in his office, an incident which continuously and morbidly obsessed him. So persistent were the thoughts that two customers had showed up that day but he had refused to receive any money from them because he was under the grim suspicion that they were agents of Nfor Nfor. And as if his misery was not enough, Salomey had revealed the heartbreaking discovery. And now it was Marion's turn. He wondered whether in the same investigatory manner Marion had not silently trailed his activities and had discovered that he was merely

deceiving the whole world about Bangui, and was waiting for an opportune moment to confront him. He felt himself exasperated, like a cornered animal with nowhere whatsoever to go, with surrender as the only way open. Surrender! The very word pained him like an ailing tooth, a whitlow.

“Why do you ask? Was it not you who introduced her to me when I was looking for a computer expert?”

This was precisely the moment he had foreseen when he got somebody to introduce Salomey to him through Marion. He fixed Marion with a threatening glare, but she simply ignored it and went on:

“I know that I brought her to you and introduced her to you. But, that was my naïveté. That was not your first time of meeting her. She has been your girl friend for about ten years. Those two boys of hers, you are their father. You are the father of her children.”

Hansel blinked his eyes as if he had been slapped in the face, and, in fact, it was a blinding slap he had just received on his whole being.

He sat up after a few minutes and stretched himself and got into a more comfortable position and called for Marion to come and sit facing him. Placing his tiny fingers inertly flat on the rectangular glass-topped coffee table he began from a tangent:

“Second Genesis, 1-25, third Genesis 1-20 tell us how God created man and put into the garden of Eden. He permitted man to eat of every other fruit in the garden, except that of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Man was not satisfied with all the luxury that Eden offered, so he went for hidden knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil. He allowed himself to be deceived by Satan. And by eating of this forbidden tree, man brought woe onto himself.

“What am I saying? We have lived together happily all this while. But you have not been satisfied, you have sought for the knowledge of good and evil. You now know evil and all good must run away from you. Woe unto you. Somebody most envious of our idyllic life, the way Lucifer envied the idyllic life of Adam and Eve, has given you a knife to put across the things that hold us together...”

“Hansel,” she continued with great resolve, “all this philosophy doesn’t bring me any nearer to the truth which alone will remove the thorns from my heart. I ask you again, did you or did you not know Salomey before I introduced her to you as a good computer expert? Are you the father of those children or not? Tell me that it is false, Hans, and let my mind rest. Are those children yours or not? True or false?”

While Hans was still searching his muddled mind for an answer, she went on: “It is an established fact. So do not even attempt to refute it.”

Hansel saw his chance. He asked her:

“If it is an established fact, then, why should you be disturbing both yourself and me with the true or false questions? Listen to me little girl (Marion shook her head sadly at the adjective). “In this problem right now, there is no such thing as an established fact. Science has developed well beyond our wildest dreams. What am I saying?”

“You know best,” she answered insolently.

“As I was about to say, science has progressed beyond our wildest dreams. Such that...”

“Such that a man can now leave his wife in the house and have children with a harlot outside?”

Hansel smacked his lips, paused for a while and then went on:

“Such that where there is a doubt about the paternity of a child...”

“Hans, there is no doubt about the paternity of those children,” Marion interrupted him again. “There is no difference between any of those children and my own children which you gave me. The children themselves have seen it.”

Hansel again refused to lose his temper. He continued:

“Science has advanced to the extent that if there is a doubt about the paternity of a child, the accusers submit the child to a DNA test. Have you done a DNA to come up with your “established fact”?”

“I don’t know what DAN means,” she confessed defiantly.

“I said DNA, not DAN.”

“Whatever it is, I deal with facts, not spellings.”

Hansel’s patience was wearing thin with all the nonsensical interruptions. But he went on:

“If you asked me, Marion, whether the whole rubbish is true or false, I would have told you my answer...”

“Which should have been? Assuming that”

“Of course you know it is “no”. My answer is “NO”, capital en o, NO”

“Marion barked a deprecating laugh which Hans ignored. He went on:

“And please, Marion, do me this favour, go back to that your James Bond or your Sherlock Holmes and tell him or her that you put the question to me and I told you ‘No.’”

“It is a her, not a him...”

“I am really glad to hear that it is a woman. Go back to her and ask her to pursue her investigation to its logical conclusion by establishing a DNA. I am willing to give you my blood ample at any minute. And while all that is going on, I want to know if you think you are better off now than when you lived in complete ignorance of that my supposed dark and dirty side. Let me even go further, and I am going further because you have told me that it is a woman who

has closed the door to your happy cheerful marriage and has opened a can of worms, a veritable chamber of horrors. And another reason I am going further is because I think you do not know that a woman's worst enemy is a woman."

"Look here," he said, reaching for the wall switch which he put on. The two ends of the fluorescent bulb glowed flickered, then glowed before the entire bulb began to shine. "You see how long it has taken this light to come on?"

Marion did not care about all the trash he was saying.

"Now see," he switched it off and the room darkened again as before.

"That is how life is. That is how happiness and sadness are. It takes a long while to build a happy life, but just a second to destroy."

To Marion, he was simply talking to his own self.

"You should never have gone to church at all, if you knew that you had such a bag of sins to hide from your chosen partner," she told him. "You should never have attended the Marriage Encounter which was only for clean and respectable people...."

"You took me to both places," Hansel responded.

"You should have refused because your sins are too heavy."

"How could I refuse a request by my faithful and loving wife?"

Marion looked across at him with a mighty scorn but said nothing. After a while she told him:

"There were things they said about you which I did not care about..."

"Such as?"

"They said my husband was a meyongo man, and that his money is meyongo money, that is why he has so much money suddenly. Now I can believe anything said about you."

“Marion,” Hansel addressed her solemnly, “a belief is a purely idiosyncratic response of an individual’s emotion to a person, place or phenomenon. Believe in what your emotion feels comfortable with. But, one day when you will come back to your senses...”

“I have not lost my senses...”

“Thank God not yet, but the way you are going, it won’t be long before my prediction comes right.”

“If that is your prayer,, Hans, let me tell you that you will fail.”

“However, Marion, as I was saying, when you will be your true self again, I will ask you one simple question: Who is your real enemy now, Hansel who has never had a problem with you, and who has lived peacefully with you as your loving husband, of the woman who has decided to wreck your life by providing you with a false microscope to plant on your husband’s backyard?”

Marion did not respond. Rather, she writhed uncomfortably in her seat.

“Again,” Hansel resumed, noticing that his words were actually having an effect on her, “assuming that your so-called established facts are in order, I would beg you to go back to that woman friend of yours who did this marvellous job for you and offer to render her the same service...”

“What service, Hans?”

“Tell her that you want to help her know everything about her husband’s extramarital life. Let me know whether she would oblige you.”

Once again Marion looked at him and turned nervously in her seat.

“Do you know what the world would like if the Almighty God whom you think you go to visit every Sunday in church provided a large screen for every family to see themselves, the lives of their children, their wives, friends and relatives?” Here Hansel smiled and said:

“You are talking of absolute chaos, my dear Marion. What if I went back and dug up the pictures of your childhood days, the boyfriends you had, and enlarged them and put on the wall in this parlour? Why should I do that? People who love others are content with their good sides. Only enemies look for the dark sides because they want to hurt.”

There was a silence, the kind of silence that is usually said to be more communicative than speech.

Chapter Twenty Four

One of the very first things to cross her mind as she sat silent was the Encounter Anthem which Hansel memorized the very day they left Futru and which he recited every morning before they said their morning prayer:

THERE'S A NEW WORLD SOMEWHERE

THERE'S A NEW WORLD SOMEWHERE THEY
CALL THE PROMISED LAND

AND I'LL BE THERE SOMEDAY IF YOU WILL
HOLD MY HAND,

I STILL NEED YOU THERE BESIDE ME NO
MATTER WHAT I DO,

FOR I KNOW I'LL NEVER FIND ANOTHER YOU.

THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE FOR EACH OF US
THEY SAY,

AND YOU'LL BE MY SOMEONE FOREVER AND
A DAY,

I COULD SEARCH THE WHOLE WORLD OVER
UNTIL MY LIFE IS THROUGH;

AND I KNOW I WILL NEVER FIND ANOTHER YOU.

IT'S A LONG, LONG JOURNEY, SO STAY BY MY
SIDE.

IF I WALK THROUGH A STORM YOU'LL BE MY
GUIDE, BE MY GUIDE.

IF THEY GAVE US A FORTUNE MY TREASURE
WOULD BE SMALL,

I COULD LOSE IT ALL TOMORROW AND NEVER
MIND AT ALL;

BUT IF I SHOULD LOSE YOUR LOVE, DEAR, I
DON'T KNOW WHAT I'D DO

FOR I KNOW I'LL NEVER FIND ANOTHER YOU.

She had concluded that her husband believed in every word he recited and sang, and loved him all the more for that. But now, she had discovered that it was all deceit, and that the words did not touch his heart. She recalled the motto on the door of the priest who received participants for confession –

*Speak the truth and speak it ever,
for, he who hides the wrong he does,
does the wrong thing still*

– and wondered if he read it at all when he went in for confession. She recalled what they were told on the first day regarding the confessions:

“As we enter this new beginning of our lives, dear brothers and sisters, we must learn to forgive. In our Lord’s prayer, Jesus tells his disciples to ask God to ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.’ You will confess all your sins, and the priest, God’s anointed, and who will never betray your secret, will intercede for God almighty to forgive you.”

The very next day, and unable to contain her disappointment, Marion returned to Futru to talk to the priest who received them for confession.

“Father”, she said after telling him that her marital life was falling apart, “did my husband tell you at confession that there was another woman in his life?”

The priest was surprised at the question because the amount of money Hansel donated was still the talk of the parish. Even if a man who had done so much for the organisation was at fault, he would not add insult to injury. Luckily, Hansel had said nothing of the sort. The priest told her:

“Madam, although it is against the canons of the church for a priest to reveal to a second party what the other said at the confessional, I must say very honestly that your husband said no such thing.”

There was silence and then he went on:

“If he did, and given his status and what his single attendance means to our organisation, I would have told either of two things. I would have told him to come and confess to you and beg for forgiveness or I would have asked him to go back to that girl and cancel the relationship, for good. After all, there is no sin too big to forgive, if only you truly repent.”

Marion shook her head sadly and said:

Father, what my husband has done to me is more than a sin. He has shattered my whole life. It is the sin of sins.”

The man of God found himself helpless before this mighty challenge. All he could do was to reiterate what Marion had heard before on that blessed (or was it cursed!) day at Futru on their first night:

There is no sin too big to be forgiven, if only you truly repent.
And then he went on to ask her:

“Madam, have you spoken to him about it?” And even before she had time reply the priest added: “What did he say? Did he not ask for forgiveness?”

“I haven’t asked him about it yet, father.” She replied. “Father, I am by nature this kind of person who forgives very easily. But my husband has never before done anything so reproachable as to warrant forgiveness. But this one, Father, I don’t know whether even if he asks me for forgiveness I will be able to...” Here she broke into tears and the man of God searched the pocket of his cassock for a packet of lotus paper from which he pulled out three and handed over to her.

“Madam,” he said, when he was sure that the grieving woman had dried her eyes, “do me this favour, go back home and open your heart to him and then come back and

tell me how he reacted to it. We shall the work out the next step and build from there. That is what marriage encounter is all about, healing wounds, not just celebrating successes in marriage.”

And so the visit ended.

All her faith in her judgement, not only of her husband's character, but of human character in general collapsed. She would never again trust anybody, any man. She wished to God that she would never find another Hansel in the next world. She thought of the psychological scheme for character assessment as completely false. There was no such thing as a *key* to the understanding and interpretation of human character. An unerring feeling of the hollowness, the deceit, the imperfectability of men had crept into her befuddled mind. Unmistakably and indelibly, the frightening belief took root in her mind that sooner or later everybody she had ever showed love and respect for would exhibit a hollowness, a deceit, an imperfection which would make her look like a fool and thus impede or make further love and respect for such an individual an impossibility, a horrible sham.

Yes, that was her new belief, a belief that became a conviction born of the urgency not to be made a fool of, the conviction not to be hurt, not to be ridiculed, not to be disillusioned ever, anymore. Hansel was her only true friend, and he had failed her. She would destroy the possibility of any new friendships that may want to come up before such a friendship ripened into the inevitable disclosure, she concluded, of the hollowness, the deceitfulness, the perennial imperfectability of man.

Hansel had taken off his brown jacket which he hung on the back rest of one of the dining table chairs. He was now dressed in a light blue shirt, a large necktie and broad

suspenders. He was speaking and pulling at the suspenders from the shoulders to the waist and then from the waist back upwards. He cleaned his hands and took a glass of ice cold water before rising as if he had just listened to a news item from the radio that may or may not matter to him. As if he had not just listened to an accusation that shook the very foundation of his married life, he rose and went and slumped into an armchair until the nape of his neck was resting against the back, the chair supporting him at only two points, the neck and the base of the spine, a picture of complete eccentric repose. Every faculty of his was instantly set into feverish activity. He fought bitterly against the thought that, worn by time and monotony, the glow of their love was gone, and that things will never be the same again.

"This is bad news for me," Hansel vituperated, "bad news for you, bad news for the children, bad news for everybody. Consider it a nightmare from which you have just woken up to find it all false. Anybody who has carried out research to come up with such information certainly doesn't love you much. It is very bad news. Have I ever been false to you, have you ever heard me being associated with any mean people or mean conduct? The desire to make a dear one happy is the true substance of love. I do not think I have been lacking in that in this house."

"But now you have been found," she pressed on. "Once is bad enough."

"Is there any woman out there in the street who would not envy you for the luxury and comfort in which you are wallowing now? Is there any woman who would not want to invent a story to supplant you in my affections in this house now? Such a person can only mean evil. If he or she was not the devil itself come to make shipwreck of your life, why does he choose this moment when God has already put all poverty and suffering behind us? This is very bad news, any way you look at it. You've laboured with me for

close to 20 years and when the harvest season comes, you want to cut yourself away. What would you say if instead of a rumour I actually brought that woman into this house as a second wife? Surely you wouldn't stop me. You wouldn't commit suicide either. Raise the issue in this house again, and you will be talking to yourself."

"What luxury and comfort are you talking about, Hans?"

Hans rubbed his hand over his head and breathed out loud. "You are telling me that a car is no longer a mark of luxury, my dear Marion?"

Marion rose and went into the room and returned within a few minutes. She held the key of her car in front of Hansel and said:

"Hansel, my personal happiness is worth far more than this. If you thought that you could exchange my personal comfort, my peace of mind, my marital happiness for a car, then you are seriously mistaken. Here, take the key and add it to the car you already bought for your harlot and let's see whether I would die. You have dishonoured the most sacred of relationships, Hansel. You have hurt me irreparably, a woman who vowed to love and respect you as my beloved husband to the end."

Chapter Twenty Five

The timing may have been wrong, but the accusation was just. And whoever it was that had revealed the secret to Salomey had not done so unjustifiably. Hans and Salomey had been in love since 1992. Precisely how it came about was now clouded in the mist of time, but Hans recalled that one day during lunch break a bevy of girls strolled into the bar, asked for some sweet drinks and began to drink and laugh and make faces at each other. They had not gone there with the hope of finding any girls, but one of them, dark with bold features, caught Hansel's attention specially. When two of the girls left Hans and his friend invited the remaining two to their table, one of whom was the dark girl.

They came, took their seats, but very politely declined to drink any further. There was a casual introduction. The girl who attracted Hansel so much was called Salomey, a third year student in the Law Faculty, but one who had decided to discontinue university studies because of sexual harassment. There were some two vicious lecturers handling two key courses who wouldn't give you a pass unless you went to bed with them, and it was rumoured that the two men were heavily diseased.

They parted on that day, promising to meet again. They did meet again and again, sometimes by sheer accident, on other occasions by plan. Before long, as it usually happens between adults interested in each other, they found themselves very deeply in love, anxious to see each other, blaming each other for absence without prior information,

wanting to see more and more of each other. They would be bound together by the strongest bonds of mutual affection and respect, by real love, in one of the longest girlfriend/boyfriend relationship ever established. Salomey had what Hans usually described as charm, a word that defies precise definition, connoting some invisible attractive force, a light in the face, an air of welcome, an almost sustained note of satisfaction in one's company, and regret without fuss at parting. Whenever he found a woman with charm, he would say, he would go for it, even though he was by no means a womaniser. Luckily there weren't many such women alive.

Hansel's rhapsodising and philosophising of Salomey's charm showed the degree to which he was infatuated with her. He would explain to anybody who cared to listen what he understood by the idea of charm. One was not talking of beauty as such, he would argue, even though charm must have its own beauty. But the first thing you notice about a woman who has charm is not her beauty. It is the chemistry that her presence sets in motion in your own body when you are with her. We are not talking about sexual arousal, even though that must also contribute to the totality of her charm. Salomey was just as beautiful as Marion, his wife, nothing fantastic about it. She wouldn't go in for a beauty contest, neither would anybody advise her to do so. But there was "something special" about her. Had Hansel been somebody you would associate with vulgarity, one would conclude that his oft quoted "something special" referred to a special performance in bed. But Hansel was so catlike in his behaviour and so puritanical in his language that if he ever discovered gold under a woman's pants he would never mention the fact even to his closest friends. The expression, therefore, must refer to a quality of the spirit that radiated from her presence, engulfing all around her, bringing out the best in human nature in those in attendance.

From experience he believed that many women live false lives and have lived so for so long that they were incapable of telling the truth. As a result, and quite instinctively, people who keep their company learn to tell lies in order to keep up appearances, to live with them at the same emotional level. A woman who has charm, a Salomey, for instance, does not seem to have any reason for telling a lie and, as a result, her male companions are inadvertently and invariably compelled to tell the truth, always. Experts say:

“A woman who has charm finds no man dull; in her presence he becomes not just a different person but the person he most wants to be. Such a woman,” they say, “gives life to his deep-felt fantasy by adding the necessary conviction to his suspicion that he is king.”

Because many women never tell the truth especially when it comes to monetary matters, men tend to disbelieve a woman whenever she says her purse is empty. A woman with charm is so generous, Salomey was so open that you must feel very guilty if she asked for money and you refused to give under the pretext that you did not have. She was not a careless spender, but while complaining of poverty, she would boil the last egg for Hans, and use the last drop of oil and the last grain of rice whenever she noticed that he needed food. She derived a lot of pleasure from being good to people in need.

Her sadness was so infectious that you would go a very long way to avoid hurting her. If you hurt her you ended up weeping more than the bereaved. Many women bored men to death and killed relationships by making it a habit of always asking, even for things they did not need, just to put your generosity to the test. A woman with charm was the reverse, she was always sensitively aware of being overbearing. Salomey would always put herself in somebody else's position, not doing to others what she would not have them do unto her. “I hope it wouldn't hurt you, Hans, if

I...” was her usual preamble, the prelude to the most harmless as well as the most monumental request. And she usually gets the go ahead.

Perhaps because of his marital status, or perhaps because he was enjoying himself well beyond what was normally acceptable, Hans was never a passionate lover. Salomey was even less passionate, even though she respected the relationship and remained a very devoted friend. For that reason, an impenetrable veil of secrecy hung over the relationship, such that only those very close to either of them could ever guess that they had something going. A too-open show of love would have endangered Salomey’s chances of finding a husband. She was only twenty-three then and had in her by natural endowment, the making of a wonderful housewife, a wonderful catch for anybody who took the time to discover her. Hans usually thought with genuine envy of the man who loved her before him and the man who will love her after him.

It was one of those misfortunes of women that a woman so good would have to wait and waste in the dark until some rascal came her way and proposed to her. Unlike a man who could go all out and get a wife, a woman would have to wait. Salomey would have to wait, with all her charm, whistling in the dark, like the beautiful flower in the elegy poem which blooms and blushes unseen in the desert air, withers and dies even when there’s nobody to see it. It was from her plight that Hansel appreciated the fact for the first time, that many really good women who would make excellent housewives remain single not out of choice but cruel circumstances. They would lose sight of each other for months and even a year or two, but when they met again they reunited and continued as though they had just met.

Quite apart from her charm, Salomey was a woman of very simple tastes. Clothes fitted her so well that you turned to look at her again each time she passed you by on the

street. And they were all simple dresses. Yet she never flaunted her beauty, preferring to stay at home with her kids, waiting for the day and hour that Hansel would show up and light her life up, and give renewed spark to her life.

In those days she was living in their family home at Ngyiata-Muku, with her parents – a hard working mother whose efforts kept the family alive, and a hard-drinking father who was not above peddling her daughter off in exchange for a bottle of beer. And he really did give her hand out to a former school mate with whom they usually drank.

Chapter Twenty Six

The school mate known only as Sir Lawrence, announced in the bar one day in 1995 that he had won the American Lottery and would be leaving soon. This gave people very much to laugh at, although it was true.

“America is for youths,” somebody said. “When you go there at this age, you will collapse and die. Don’t think it is Cameroon where you will hide in the house and at the end of the month you are the first at the bank to claim your salary. You work for every cent. And then, talking about work, what kind of work can you do there? You are a headmaster here, controlling hundreds of teachers and thousands of pupils. There in America, you are not good enough to be the sweeper of a classroom. If you have the opportunity to wash dishes, or to guard a compound, you count yourself lucky...”

“Sour grapes,” Sir Lawrence said. He did not want to look at things in that realistic light.

“When you are going, include my daughter’s name in your list,” Pa Nico, Salomey’s father said. “Let her be your wife.”

“Give my father-in-law a drink,” Sir Lawrence said.

“Pa Nico accepted the drink with thanks and then said: “Perhaps St. Lawrence thinks I am joking...”

“Perhaps it is you who think I am joking,” Sir Lawrence replied.

It turned out not to be a beer bar talk entirely because the two men discussed the matter more seriously afterwards. Inevitably Salomey was brought into the show and, although Sir Lawrence did not cut the figure of the kind of person she would certainly have got married to if she had a choice, she thought it was better than nothing. But if she were to get married and remain in the country, the possibility that friends would ridicule her for the poor choice, would always be there. They were to disappear into America where nobody cared about anybody else, where she would get her green card, educate her children very well, get a good job and wait until the day her husband departed, leaving her a happy widow. She consented to the arrangement, some money changed hands and traditional rights were performed.

Sir Lawrence then left with his three children to go and prepare the ground for the coming of his wife. He was to return in a month. A few days after Sir Lawrence departed, being the good girl that she was, Salomey thought it necessary to let Hansel know what was happening. She wrote a letter to Hans in which she explained:

My Dear Mr. Hansel;

I hope by this letter you do not think that I must have been cheating on you. Just that an opportunity presented itself and I decided to seize it. There is a gentleman who proposed marriage to me and has even met my parents. We have even gone so far as to perform the traditional rites. He won the American Lottery and is currently making plans for me to travel to the U.S. and join him. Please don't feel too bad. Remember you once said you would be the very last person to stand in my way if I ever met somebody who wanted to marry me.

Hans showed just the kind of maturity that had bound them together for so long. "That I will feel bad is true," he said, "but that is understandable. But it had always been my greatest wish and prayer that you meet somebody who can take you in and discover how much goodness as a wife there is in you. I give you my blessings, Salomey, in that new relationship. Mine has been only a caretaker government."

But, to cut a stupid story short, the marriage didn't work. Sir Lawrence was already 55, with grown up children by his first marriage who were even of Salomey's age. He was not very anxious for another wife. Besides, he discovered that he could make a lot of money by taking on the names of people who were ready to pay as his family members. There were people who were ready to pay as much as 3million francs. Thus, instead of spending 500,000 francs as bride price for a woman he did not terribly need, he decided to sell her place for more money. He did not even give Salomey and her parents the option of paying him some money. He simply kept quiet.

When she was convinced that the whole deal had collapsed, she informed Hans who had been following the unfolding of events very curiously. He did not hold her responsible, he simply blamed fate and went on with her just as before. One day she told Hans: "the way things are going, I cannot just sit back waiting. With these kinds of disappointments, one could grow old without being aware of it. I am 28 now and will soon be on the other side of life, neither as a wife nor as a mother. Without a husband, without a child. Let me have one child to console me. I think I can take care of my child."

And so it happened that they went in for a child and in December 1997, Hansel killed two birds with one stone, Salomey gave birth to a pair of twins. Two boys.

“No problem,” she said as this was far more than she had bargained for. “I can take care of them.”

One bright day, like a ghost from the underworld come to haunt the living, that bird of ill omen, Sir Lawrence, the “America Wonder,” resurfaced. He had not been home for a year. Feeling extremely guilty over his jilting of his friend’s daughter he took to the offensive. He told Pa Nico that he was going to sue them for double dealing. He accused Pa Nico of receiving money from him and then giving his daughter’s hand to somebody else. By then he had learnt that she was going out with a certain banker.

He did actually sue Salomey who having not heard from Sir Lawrence told her father to say nothing about it to the man. The charge was infidelity: having paid the dowry for his wife and left her behind to go ahead and prepare the way for her coming, he was said to have been very embarrassed to learn from his friends and relatives that she had turned flirt, the final proof being that she now had a pair of twins, the result of her carefree life.

Salomey defended herself stoutly. After waiting for a whole year without receiving a word from her husband, she took to drinking to calm her nerves. On one occasion during the Women’s Day celebrations, she took a drink too much, fell into the hands of some unknown rascals who took advantage of her drunkenness and raped her. The twins were a result of that incident. She could not recall any of the faces or names with whom they drank on that day. In fact she did not even know something of the sort had transpired until she had missed her period at the end of the month.

The case was dismissed. Sir Lawrence was very disappointed because he had hoped, as he had been made to believe, to make a fortune from her and her banker lover. She had proven that she was no fool. She had discreetly concealed the identity of the father of the children.

Her hide and seek game with Hansel continued without any serious interruption.

Marion's attack on Hansel's perfidy had a very painful effect on him. After talking to him she never again raised the issue of his friendship with Salomey. But she refused to drive the car Hansel had bought for her and when Hansel begged her she told him to sell it. This was what brought Hansel to his knees. He begged for forgiveness and promised to remain good for the rest of his life with her. She finally forgave him although she did not believe him.

"When I say I have forgiven you, it is not because I know that the problem is over. I am a woman and I know what my children mean to our relationship. Once a woman has had a child with somebody, it is hard to separate them. If I do not forgive you what else will I do? Pack out of this house? That can't be. I must live here to take care of my children in the same way that I know there is no way you can be separated from your lover. Your children are in her house."

Chapter Twenty Seven

The reason for this sudden change of heart in her attitude towards her husband's betrayal stemmed from a visit she had paid to her erstwhile good friend, Appolonia. This, too, was as a result of a challenge Hansel had thrown to her when she first accused her. Hansel had told her to go back to her secret informant and see if she would be willing to accept that she should help her investigate her husband's extra-marital activities. At the time Hansel was challenging her, she dismissed it as *mere self defense*. and so paid very little attention to it. But one day it occurred to her that she could actually help her friend. She went to Appolonia and in the course of their conversation she asked her, with no intention of hurting or teasing her:

"Sister, have you ever tried to find out the girlfriends your husband has?"

"No," Appolonia responded.

"Why not?" Marion enquired, a sense of suspicion gradually creeping into her mind.

"I have never thought it necessary. Why should?"

"But what if I suggest that we find it out?"

"I don't think it necessary. I simply don't care about it. It doesn't bother me."

For the very first time in their long friendship, Marion stared at her intimate friend with distaste. The thought that Hansel may have been right frightened her. Appolonia was looking directly at her when she was questioning her. She saw the expression on her friend's face, it was one of contempt.

"Why are you asking me such questions, my friend?" she asked Marion as anger had begun to simmer in her breast.

“Because that nonsense which we discovered has turned my marital life upside down,” Marion replied.

“And so?” Appolonia asked with growing insolence. “Was it not you yourself who asked me to carry out the investigation?”

“My sister,” she went on, “when I came up to you and reported the case to you, as a big sister and an older hand in marriage you should have advised me not to bother myself trying to do so...”

“Why should I have done so? You asked me to render a service because you knew that I was your best friend. And I rendered you the service as sincerely as a good friend can do. You did not ask me whether you should pursue the investigation or not. I had no way of knowing how it would turn out to be.”

Marion departed from Appolonia without saying a word, and with that their friendship evaporated. And now her life became more and more miserable: she could no longer attend the Marriage Encounter and avoided the company of anybody associated with it; she had lost the love of her dear husband, and now she had lost her best friend. That was why she had begun to put a fine face on the problem.

But she refused to drive the car. After many unsuccessful attempts to talk her out of her decision, Hansel let her alone and went about his business. “Time heals all wounds,” he told himself. But something had gone out of him. With the thought of possible exposure by Nfor Nfor hanging over him like the proverbial Sword of Damocles, and with Marion turned completely against him, life became terribly unbearable. Not even the wealth he had amassed from people was enough consolation. He was a miserable man although he tried every minute to put a fine face on the matter. There were times when ridiculous thoughts crossed his mind: he would call all the shareholders together and refund their monies, he would simply kill himself, he would flee to America with his children, leaving the hardhearted Marion to her devices.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Shortly after his memorable trip from Bangui with the company pickup truck, Hansel did several things concerning the upkeep of the company: he raised the question of an AGM (Annual General Meeting) at the earliest opportunity. They were six months away from the 12th of February, one year to the day he received or rather introduced his letter of employment. It was on that day that they held an AGM. There he presented to the Board the plan for a large area he had seen in Ngomgham which would be purchased.

They took a drive to Ngomgham, just about five kilometres away. They would inspect and approve of the site. It was large enough to take a block of offices, machine plants and many other facilities. The Board would in due course, but before the AGM, visit the site again and make suggestions. The Chinese were ready to finance half of the 100 million project. It would be left to shareholders to work out modalities for fulfilling their own end of the bargain. But they would know that the more they invested, the higher their dividends. If the Chinese were allowed to set the plant up alone, they would gladly do it, he would tell them. But all the accruing profit would go into their pockets.

The present office building was now for sale in readiness to move to Ngomgham, its permanent location. Fifty million francs or the best offer was the price of the office. The best offer could only come up to thirty-five. Hansel did not particularly care about that. The premises would be vacated sometime early in the new year. That should give them enough time to develop the new site in Ngomgham.

At the AGM there would be a report on the situation in Bangui, meaning that a delegation must have gone there and returned before the AGM. He summoned a Board Meeting at which he discussed the impending trip to Bangui and asked Mr. Limen Isidore to head a small committee that was to select those who would represent the group at Bangui.

Finally, he succeeded in securing the services of the editor of THE VOICE, the most popular local newspaper, on his payroll, in his pocket, to be exact. He did not tell the man exactly what kind of business he was engaged in, and the man did not try too much to know. But he was told that every time he published something interesting for the company he had a bonus. The editor did his best. His best was not enough and Hansel had to write out the news items which were published. He did the same thing for the news announcer for the radio. Thus the company was given sufficient coverage, every week there was a major article on the company: CRABS AND SHELLS FETES BOSS, CRABS AND SHARES LOSES FOUNDING MEMBER, CRABS AND SHELLS SELECTS TEAM FOR BANGUI ETC. Hansel was kept constantly in the spotlight. Limen's committee met and came up with a list of those they thought could represent them. They were ten in number.

Before they went to bed the previous night, the selected members of the delegation were informed that the take off time would be at 10 o'clock from the CRABS AND SHELLS office. Hansel himself was up very early and by 7 o'clock he was already in the office feeding bits and pieces of information into his laptop and putting his files in order. By 9 o'clock when he looked out of the window he could see that everybody was present. There were also a good number of other members of the company who had braved the morning chill to see their delegated comrades off to Bangui. They stood conversing between the two vehicles

which they were to take along – Mr. Edmund Merengieh's Pajero and Hansel's SKIPPIO A1 which he had parked on the kerb. When they saw Hansel approaching they stopped talking and drifted slowly towards him for more news or instructions.

The sun rose rather early and there was every promise that the day was going to be a hot one. But within the thirty minutes that they stood near the office, the sky darkened to the extent that motorists put on their sidelights. Thunder was heard faintly in the distance and within minutes the sky above them began to split and they had to hurry and perhaps leave the rain behind them.

Like a general inspecting his troops just before a battle, Hansel shook hands with each and every one of them, offering his peculiarly warm handclasp followed by a tap on the back of the hand, which always made people feel that he genuinely loved them. The ten seemed to represent a cross-section of the different shades of interests within the company – the police, customs, business women, principals, truckers and transporters. Hansel was dressed in deep blue jeans, jacket and trousers and a blue baseball cap to match. In front of the cap were the initials C&S, an obvious abbreviation of CRABS AND SHELLS. Somebody asked why he couldn't have caps like his made for everybody else.

"When we return from Bangui," he promised.

The first to stretch his hand was pa Edmund Merengieh, the doyen of the group. Merengieh was in his early seventies, a powerfully built man of medium size, and a dark complexion. One noticeable thing about him was that he was always scrupulously well shaved. He had wide sloping shoulders that gave him a round-shouldered look, and he moved with a bouncing gait as though his left leg were slightly shorter than the other. He loved gardening obsessively, with the result that his hands were callused,

the nails broken and generally unclean. His face was oval, his eyes bold and contemplative with thick heavy folds of skin below, his mouth large and his nose flat with cavernous nostrils. He had a heavily lined and equally sloping forehead, thick dyed brows above a pair of eyes set apart which glowed with a fierce intensity.

He was a man who loved to show off his wealth. He had a pair of golden teeth which he took pleasure in exposing to admiring company. The story goes that these were new teeth, that when he visited his sons in the U.K. some years back and complained about his teeth the dentist replaced four of the front teeth with golden ones. On his return he had made so much noise about the teeth that one night armed robbers surprised him in his office and wrenched them off to go and melt them and make earrings.

He had a potbelly and splayed feet and wore tight-fitting trousers that always hung inches above his ankles. He had been the delegate of Highways for over ten years, during which time he accumulated a great fortune. He became extremely rich principally because he controlled the heavy machinery used for road construction projects. As if he was not answerable to anybody, he could hire out caterpillars, front loaders and any other equipment at will and for any amount he chose. He could divert sand, gravel and even cement meant for government jobs into private ventures. This enabled him to put up several houses which he put out on rents and also to send all his children abroad who now sent him money and vehicles at will. He was one of the early members of the company.

Next to Edmund Merengieh stood Godfred Mukulu Foso, the quick-tempered Customs Inspector. He was a very big man, huge, with phenomenal physical strength, and had the hands of a strangler and the arms of a heavy weight wrestler or boxer. He weighed over 120 kilograms. He stood close to two metres tall, stuttered in his speech and always talked

big. More than once, he was said to have described his ten shares in CRABS AND SHELLS as “peanut money.” While still in service he made a lot of money at the port. As it so often happened, businessmen placed orders for certain goods which they were unable to clear. With time the charges for storage increased to the extent that they were unable to claim the goods and the containers. At such moments the goods were auctioned. The immediate beneficiaries were the Customs Inspectors who got many of the items virtually free or at give-away prices which they resold to other businessmen, and sometimes to the same traders with very high profits.

He was said to have a large house in every town (wealth was invariably measured by the number of houses people put up!), two very large students’ residents at the University of Buea and a string of taxis. There was not a hair anywhere either on his face or his head, evidence that he was bald, didn’t like the idea, and decided to keep his head bare. He had hard, chiselled features, high cheekbones, thick lips and scattered teeth. He spoke rather fast and seemed to take offence at the slightest inconvenience. At such times he could be insufferably obscene. The adrenaline shot through his every vein, he was always threatening to beat the hell out of somebody. He was a man of rather crude manners of hygiene. For instance, while they stood chatting, he took everybody by surprise by unzipping his trousers and pouring hot urine on the kerb in full view of passers-by. Woe betide anybody who dared to challenge him.

That morning he had come dressed in his Inspector’s Uniform, to give the trip the seriousness of purpose that he thought it deserved.

Next to Foso came Maurice Agenmedia the transporter and owner of at least six 70-seater buses that plied the major routes – Douala/Yaounde, Douala/Bamenda, Bamenda/Limbe. Probably of Bamoum stock, Agenmedia was a self-

made man who grew up the hard way. Adversity did not move him deeply. He was not surprised by it. The simplest food contented him and in small quantities. He had been one of five children, orphaned while they were very young. Even if his parents had lived and continued to work on their farm, his life would have been extremely hard. It would have been a life hungry with poverty and emaciated with need and shamed by lack. But when the parents died the children fell to the only living grandmother.

The children were invariably hungry. Their days began in exhaustion, were hoired in exhaustion and ended by exhaustion. Their suffering produced in them a precocity for enduring which he was to carry all his life. Quickly enough, the children learned how things were ordered in the world into which they had been born and they accepted the world the way they accepted the seasons. None of the children was ever ashamed of patched clothes, of shoeless feet or uncut hair, never, as long as they lived. When other children mocked their raggedness they saw what the children mocked, and grinned too.

Out of the lot, Maurice gradually worked his way up. He worked as a cleaner in the store of a Lebanese; worked as his warehouse clerk, cashier and bookkeeper. Here he learned the art of making money, of saving and of building up a career in business. He then became a taxi man, a driver for the Lebanese man's truck before becoming his own master. All he cared for was making money. His meals were spare and very scanty and it told on him because he looked cranky and pale. But he was in very good health. Hearing about the death of a fellow businessman one day he exclaimed:

"What! One can make like this and die without enjoying any of this money that we spend day and night looking for."

He is then said to have bought peanuts for one hundred francs, two plums for fifty francs and a roasted plantain for fifty francs. He ate all, drank a small bottle of coke and exclaimed "Let death come now, I am ready."

Whenever there was an opportunity to add to his wealth, he exploited it. He had ten shares in CRABS AND SHELLS. He was the man who first introduced the idea now in practice whereby stockholders ploughed back their dividends for more shares and profit. Pressed for time Hansel rushed through the ceremony of handshaking and immediately went to arrange how they would travel. Madam Genevieve (representative of Happy Widows), Cranford Metuge (proxy for the OIC Manager), Godfred Mukulu Foso and Agenmedia would travel with Merengieh in his Pajero. Nkwain Bob Joe (proxy for the Provincial Treasurer), Langmia Sylvanus, Fombalang Fidelis, Limen Isidore and Sancho Sancho Tobiasis, would travel with him in his SKIPPIO A1.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The trip had all the hallmarks of young boys and girls going on a safari, which, in a sense, though unwittingly, it turned out to be, and very little about the actual business on hand. As they stopped at the fuel station to top their tanks, Hansel announced:

“First stop is Kekem, boys. Some soya, some fruits, some beer wouldn’t bar us from reaching Bangui, what do you think?”

“You have a point there,” somebody concurred, and then added, “whoever gets there first, waits for the others.”

It was agreed. But they couldn’t take off because the rain grew stronger and more violent, impairing the vision of the drivers. They waited for close to an hour and then they finally took off.

In Hansel’s car there wasn’t much talk in the beginning. As soon as they took off he made a quick selection of his choicest cassettes: Classical music, the music of Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and the like. The stereo system in the car was so good that it was not easy to tell where exactly the music was coming from. Soft, so distant, so melodious and unobtrusive that you could carry on your conversation without noticing it, but it hung there in the air.

“You seem to like church music so much,” somebody remarked at the interest was showing in the music.

“This is not church music,” he corrected. “This is classical music, the music of the masters...” How would he know when he never went to church?

“But I have heard it played in church before,” the man insisted.

“I don’t doubt it,” Hans resumed. “Classical music is so engrossing that through it a mortal seems to be communicating with the deity. Yes, they play it in church, and for good reason. JESU JOY OF MAN DESIRING, by Beethoven is, in fact a church song, and also is Handel’s THE MESSIAH... I love music in general just that I am passionate to the soft classical kind. They say a love of music is necessary to complete the character of a gentleman. They say those who listen to music find their solitude peopled at once...”

He had a story to tell about each of the great musicians. Beethoven, he said, was so filthy that his friends would steal into his room at night to carry his clothes away for washing, otherwise he would wear the stinking garments to his heavenly performance, to the abhorrence of all. He would not let anyone touch his room, so that everything lay about in incredible disorder, papers strewn on chairs, ink spilt into the piano, remains of food on plates under the papers.... Beethoven who became deaf at 30, before his real career of music began was also very forgetful. He walked into a restaurant in Vienna one day, forgot to ask for a meal and in the end shouted at the waiters to bring his bill.

Mozart was his idol, the boy wonder who was born with absolute pitch, infallible rhythm and natural comprehension of harmony. At the age of 10 he astounded Hollanders by playing superbly on the largest, most complicated organ in the world. At 14 he was taken to hear the Vatican choir sing a long, difficult MISERERE which was kept so secret that the singers were forbidden to copy the parts on pain of excommunication. The boy drank in every note, and walked home and wrote the entire piece out from memory. On the second hearing, he was distressed to find that he had made two mistakes. Instead of excommunicating him the Pope made him Knight of the Golden Spur.

“His father made much money carrying the boy from one European capital to the other where he played to the courts for a handsome reward....”

“Child Labour,” the young man Cranford said at the top of his voice, waking up those who had been dozing.

“Child Labour, indeed,” Hansel repeated. ‘It’s an old tradition. Many of those vices we condemn today are as old as mankind...’

Thus when at Kekem where they were all taking a well-deserved rest and an old man came along with a small boy playing the guitar for money, Cranford threw in a quip:

“Here comes papa Mozart again with his young commodity.”

Only those who had travelled with Hans caught the joke and laughed. Somebody else retold the joke but, out of context, it sounded different, not funny. At least not commensurate with the laughter which it had provoked. Kekem was a noisy little place in which everybody seemed to be engaged in one form of business or the other. Soya boys fought with women and girls selling *bobolo*; shoeless little boys with decaying teeth, selling shoe polish and toothbrushes, struggled with little girls selling bananas and sweet yams, etc etc. It was a mad house.

As they gratefully departed from the place, Hansel was in his most reflective mood. He sat as if he was alone in the car, sometimes whistling to the rhythm of the melody from the cassette. And, in fact, he was never more alone than when he was in the company of his stockholders. Indeed he knew that there was no love lust either between him and every other person or even amongst the stockholders themselves. He knew that only one thing had brought them together – greed. These were people who saw every human relationship in economic or financial terms – *homo economicus*, *homo* shit!

They were people who had bade an everlasting farewell to poverty, people who had arrived. They each had two, three or even four children, in America, in Britain, Germany, Belgium and the like. With only one phone call they would go to the WESTERN UNION with sacks to collect money sent from abroad or drive down to the port in Douala and clear vehicles sent by their children to drive around or sell. They could only get richer. As a famous musician once sang, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, confirming the biblical adage that onto those who have, more shall be added, and to those who have not, even the little that they have shall be taken away from them.

Hansel knew them all as grabbers. If they knew they could get rid of him and claim all the money that had been invested, they would gladly do so. These were men with an insatiable thirst for money, money and more money. They pretended to lick his boots because through him they were making enough dividends to make them walk the streets with their heads held permanently high, their pockets swollen to bursting point with loose cash. While out in the streets studious and conscientious civil servants with unfed families stood for hours in front of banks and other financial institutions every month end in order to claim a beggarly, begrudging and demeaning pittance. That was what the government called a salary, not even enough to maintain an automobile, let alone clothe a family. Civil servants who could normally have earned about 200,000 francs, if they laboured within the fetters of their conscience. But they had refused to suffer and rot and had raised themselves from mud to financial glory by their own very bootstraps. And they were still not satisfied. They hungered for more, they wanted more and more money.

He knew them all as grabbers, especially the civil servants amongst them. They were not men of such virtue that one would feel uneasy hurting them. Directly behind

him, swathed in a sky blue *agbada*, was Langmia Sylvanus, the THS stores accountant who normally drove a Pajero, the newest variety; a category B2 officer who in all conscience should not have enough to buy a motor cycle. But here he was, with ten shares to his credit, and counting.

In his early sixties Langmia was tall and walked clumsily because he was also obese, from too much eating and drinking. His round face, bloated with continual drinking, which ended in a double chin was very smooth, so were his hands, evidence that he lived in absolute comfort. He generally wore an *agbada* or some kind of *jumpe* to conceal the rotundity of his stomach. Beneath his broad, high forehead were a pair of small alert eyes, deep-set and drowned by the fat cheeks and swollen eyelids. His teeth were badly broken and discoloured, such that he talked indistinctly, partly owing to the heavy moustache so that it was an effort to listen to him.

On record Langmia Sylvanus controlled the contractors who supplied food to the THS dormitories and chemicals to the laboratories. But in actual fact, there was no dormitory, and no laboratory. Every year he received millions for these non-existent activities, the proceeds from which he shared with the hierarchy down the line. He had five villas which had all been hired out to the state. Money should not have been his problem. But here he was, looking for more.

Next to him was Fombalang Fidelis Fofum, the famous or rather infamous Principal of the famous Midweek Bilingual High School. The reputation of Midweek was extremely high, a fact which had nothing to do with Fombalang, or rather Fombalang had nothing to do with it. It is just that the school was centrally located and so had over the years attracted top calibre teaching staff. Their Ordinary and Advance Level results were usually the absolute best in terms of numbers and in terms of the quality

of the performance of their best students. Because of these factors, parents did anything to get their children admitted there. It was said that Fombalang had sold two houses to raise enough money to buy the office in the Ministry. He was also in his sixties but dressed in the colourful style of a teenager, constantly wore silver-rimmed unusually high-heeled shoes, large baggy trousers (the latest in fashion), flashy shirts. His hair grew thickly on his head and he always took his time to comb or brush it so that it overhung his broad forehead. He definitely used a very fine kind of dye for there was no trace of grey anywhere on his head, and there ought to be! His face looked like that of a car that had been involved in a head-on collision: a deep scar accentuating his furious expression, ran in a broad cleft from the left cheekbone, ending at the nose which had almost cut into two. The bridge of the nose seemed to have been crushed and flattened and the tip of the nose which was rounded and sweaty came almost to a point.

He wore a gold watch on his left wrist and a loose gold chain on his right hand. There were at least two rings on each hand. Every member of his family was said to own a car, or rather that he had bought a car for every member of his family. A simple Category A2 civil servant who should not earn more than 200,000 francs a month, he spent his holidays abroad, had his children in the most expensive British and American universities, and all this he did with ease. At the beginning of the school year, he simply declared that the admission list for all the classes was already full. Then he would send round his agents who negotiated with anxious parents for the admission of their children at the rate of 50,000 francs per child. Admission was supposed to be free and, children admitted into the Government colleges did not pay fees. He took advantage of the fact that a parent would prefer to lose 50,000 francs as bribe at once and pay little or nothing for the rest of the years. He even went

further, he expanded the sizes and numbers of classrooms, for greater profit. Officially the enrolment per class was fifty. He could go up to 80 and either keep the profit all to himself or share it with his accomplices. In a good school year he made about fifty million francs. That's why sometime ago when the principal was informed that he was due retirement he begged to remain on his job for a year even without pay, he knew how much money he made on the spot. Such a man was there with him, a starving banker, looking for more and more money.

In the distant back seat was Santcho Santcho Tobias, another Category A2 civil servant who had been in the field for barely six years, but had grown enormously rich. His business was Dossiers, to the extent that people simply addressed him as Pa Dossiers. His business was to look for people who had problems with their documents in the Ministries, especially with the Ministry of Finance. He solved the problems at his expense and then you shared the proceeds according to an agreed percentage. Sometimes for a problem of up to 500,000 francs, he took 20%. In some cases he got away with 25%, 30% or even 50%. Some lucky months he made 20 million francs, because he could handle four or five or more of such cases all at once. In addition, he had worked out a system whereby for a fee of 50,000 francs he could make it possible for you to secure a two-months advanced salary. Once that money reached your hands, say a million francs, he can go back to the computer, if you gave him a third of your earning, and erase the debt so that you actually went away with 600,000 francs, free.

Hansel knew them all, and he had no respect for them, had read them all like a book. He too needed only their money, which he was getting. If he showed any love towards them it was like a farmer fertilizing his farm, not out of love for the soil, but so that it should give him more food. He knew them all.

Chapter Thirty

Before they left Kekem Cranford announced, to the excitement of everybody:
“The Abakwa boys are on the podium today. They play Union Douala in Akwa stadium.”

“If we arrive in good time, maybe we can make a brief stop there and see what they are up to.”

“Make it an order, boss,” Pa Merengieh stepped in. “Just imagine what a boost that would be to their morale if those boys suddenly saw this bunch of North West dignitaries strolling into the stadium to watch them perform...”

It was concluded. They would hastily check into the hotel where Hansel had already made the reservations, brush up and then go to the field to cheer the Abakwa Boys up. Luckily the rain had not yet started falling in Douala, although the sky was darkening fast with thick nimbus clouds shrouding the rays of the sun.

In Pa Merengieh’s car the talk was all about football. Merengieh himself had been a very good defenseman in his younger days. Playing in several Second Division teams he had ended up with P.W.D, the team he had come to love passionately, fanatically even. In old age he was a die-hard fan, a patron of the darling First Division Team for the Province – P.W.D., Abakwa Boys, or simply “P” as it was fondly called. Everybody seemed to support the team, including Madam Genevieve who maintained a discreet silence over many of the topics raised by the men.

Pa Merengieh had a stock of old stories about the team. He recalled that in a certain match P.W.D. needed just one point to avoid relegation to the Second Division, and it was

going to play Canon F.C. which also needed just one point to clinch the championship. Since match-fixing was the rule rather than the exception in Cameroon football, the two teams needed to sit down and discuss and end up with a draw. But Canon, being a superior team thought it could make some money for itself: when the manager of P.W.D. approached the manager of Canon, the latter said P.W.D. must pay one million francs or face obvious relegation. The P.W.D. manager offered 500,000 francs, then six hundred, seven hundred and finally eight hundred. The Canon manager would not budge from the one million. In the end, the P.W.D. manager rallied his boys and explained:

“We have offered them up to eight hundred thousand, but they would not accept. All our patrons have been consulted but we cannot get more than this. This is my suggestion, I will give five hundred thousand to the coach. Anybody who scores a goal gets one hundred thousand even before they centre the ball.”

Here he laughed for a very long time and continued with watering eyes:

“The first goal for P was scored from a corner kick, by the goal keeper of P. who headed the ball into the net and went for his money before returning to his goal. By half time P. was leading two zero. The manager of Canon looked and finally located the manager of P.

“What was it you proposed?”

The man smiled to himself and said: “Let’s wait for the end of the game. P won by a margin of two goals to one.”

Agenmendis, another fanatic and patron recalled an incident in which, noticing the wretchedness of the team he gave them one hundred thousand francs to purchase a new set of jerseys so as to look impressive. The very next weekend the team appeared still looking just as wretched as ever. After the match he invited the manager to reprimand him for lack of seriousness with the team.

‘I don’t see why you would take money and sit on it while jerseys are decaying on players’ backs.’

“I did not sit on the money, pa,” the manager said.

“But there is no evidence that you used it well. What did you do with the money?”

‘I knew that what was important, pa, was a victory, so instead of buying new jerseys and losing the match, we gave the money to the referee. You can see how easily we won.’

There was another laugh.

They entered Douala in the early hours of the afternoon. As usual they were greeted by its gruelling heat, stinking gutters of stagnant water, the breeding ground for mosquitoes, dead dogs and tottering structures, each hiding and peeping from behind the other, its ceaseless flow of human beings, each bent upon making a living in any way possible. Alighting from the vehicles with their air conditioning systems it was as if warm air current was being blown through a tube into the faces and bodies of the visitors, causing them to sweat instantly. Hotel Nouveautel was not far from the Akwa stadium, surrounded in part by an old cement wall with holes large enough to admit a human, guarded by policemen from inside, partly by pieces of old zinc that replaced the broken walls in several places, again with policemen guarding it from inside against any intruders.

The playground proper left much to be desired. There were patches of grass along the edges of the field, evidence that it was once a grass field. But from the centre across to the goalposts, was bear ground, hard earth. Woe betide anybody who fell, for the risk of wounding a knee, an elbow or a forehead was always there. In the centre there was a pool so large that the ball was “centred” on dry ground, outside the centre circle. There had once been a railing to

keep spectators away from the playground, but it had been pulled down and repaired so often that in the end the FECAFOOT (Federation of Cameroon Football) gave up, with the result that spectators stood as close to the lines as possible. When there was a penalty kick they invaded the field and surrounded both the goal area and the penalty box. It was a miracle that Cameroonian players used to these badly kept field were able to make it in Europe where they had superb playgrounds.

As they had expected, their presence just before the match created a lot of sensation amongst the PWD supporters in the stadium. They were bent on impressing the “big guns” who had come all the way from Bamenda to support them. At half time, buoyed by this feeling, they led the home team 2 nil, a lead they would conserve to the victorious end. At half time, too, Hansel invited Pa Merengieh and three others to go and visit the PWD corner. There Hansel counted 150,000 francs and put in an envelope which he gave to Merengieh which he handed to the manager of the club to “show their solidarity.” Some of the supporters were so excited that they suggested that the match be abandoned in order for them to go and enjoy the windfall.

It was an error they made in going to the stadium without a good rest, given their advanced ages. As a result, they slept through the match, including even Merengieh, only waking up occasionally when shouts accompanied some dazzling move. It was with the greatest relief that the final whistle was sounded. Plus, the heat was unbearable, and everyone longed to be in the hotel where they could enjoy their air conditioned room.

It was easy to tell the side that had won: Bearers of blue and white flags, ran ahead of the pack of blue and white shirts over blue shorts (the PWD colours), who jogged round the stadium, most of them having hastily changed in blue

track suits and blue caps. They were joined by enthusiastic supporters and well-wishers also capped in blue and who seemed to provide an accompaniment of rattles and shouted slogans as they trotted round and round to acknowledge the cheers of admiring fans, above the jeers of the fans of the losing team. This was the PWD in victory, their first in eleven matches!

As they meandered their way through the bumper-to-bumper traffic jam in Akwa, it occurred to Hansel to check on his e-mail.

"I am always on call," he remarked as he dashed out of the car and went into the nearby CYBER CAFÉ DU CIEL. He returned with two letters. The first was from the Government Delegate of Limbe Urban Council, urging him to come down personally and receive payments already made to him for some 20 new members. Hansel also needed to meet the man being proposed as the South West Coordinator for Crabs and Shells. Urgency was stressed.

At the lobby of the hotel he and his passengers waited for the others to alight from the other vehicle, and then he passed the e-mails around.

"It means you might not go with us to Bangui, Prince," somebody asked the question uppermost in everybody's mind.

"It simply means that, but that in itself has no effect on the goal of the mission. I was even wondering whether it was all that necessary for all of us to go there. Think about it, especially now that a call to other duties has sidelined me. It is your show, let it not look like I am imposing anything on you. Choose some five or six members who will represent major interest groups. What is important is the findings, the notes you will make there which will help us improve on what we have. In particular, since we would sooner or later set up plant on Cameroon soil, in Limbe, Barombi Lake, Lakes Oku, and Bambili, it will be important for the group

to return with approximate size of each plant based on the mother plant in Bangui, the approximate cost of the movables, salary scales. Any offers?”

Edmund Merengieh opted to study the repairs, installations and the dismantling of the equipment. His engineering skills would come in handy. Godfred Mukulu Foso, the Customs man opted to study expenses involved in importation of various machines and the payment of the necessary taxes. He would be able, based on what he would bring down, to negotiate with state functionaries of the Taxation Department for advantageous deals.

“If any idiot tries to disturb us I will bend his neck,” he vowed.

Mr. Limen Isidore would oversee all aspects of the trip from the moment they stepped into the plane to the minute they hopped out back here. In fact, he would coordinate the various activities and come up with ideas as to how the group with different ideas and backgrounds can work as one team with a single goal. Madam Genevieve was to study the food situation and estimate how much could be spent on how many people in a workers’ Canteen of a certain size over a certain period. Cranford was added to the team because of his proficiency in French which they might need in Bangui. The team to go to Bangui was now known: Merengieh, Mr. Limen Isidore, Mr. Godfred Mukulu Foso, Cranford Henry, and Madam Genevieve. Hansel asked for their ID cards with which he dispatched his driver to town to purchase air tickets.

The second e-mail was from Lee Ping Yung, it was far more encouraging:

Got the message on impending visit of team. We are in place and anxious to meet them. Not difficult to find us, hope you send one or two good cameras along. You will spot us in our yellow baseball caps and green aprons. Good thing they return tonight, that’ ll cut overnight cost.

*More important, urgent need for at least 100 labourers,
your people here continue to shock me with laziness.
Also enlist services of 11 trucks. All expenses, as
usual, to be reimbursed on delivery.*

Stay blessed. LPY

Coordinator General,

Rue des Grandes Ambitions, Bangui

When the last man to read handed over the mail to Hansel he remarked with only a tinge of regret.

“So, but for this Limbe thing, all is going as planned.”

Only Mr. Limen Isidore said anything of importance. He asked:

“How do you get your trucks up there, Prince, with all these *coupeurs des routes*?”

“Very risky business,” Hansel said. “Very risky. That’s why we pay the drivers very high. That’s why we encourage them to travel in convoys. They also carry firearms, to defend themselves.”

He did not seem to know much about the travel by road to Bangui or, if he did, he did not show it. But he sounded tentative and he was glad to avoid the topic by obtaining permission to try to buy a camera from the electronic shops. Finally he found an ASAHI PENTAX. He said he paid 50,000 francs, and it looked it. The camera was given to Nkwain who convinced the group that he was good at taking pictures.

While he was away to buy the camera, Agamendian, a tireless story-teller who was really familiar with the Bangui overland route, told the story of two friends, two businessmen who decided to go to Bangui on their regular trading trips. One had borrowed 200,000 francs from the other, promising to pay back on their return, plus some interest. Somewhere around Garoua, they were set upon by the gangsters. Seeing that the highwaymen would make away

with all their money and he would have to pay a debt of money he never used, the man who had borrowed the money told the friend who had lent him the money:

“Boh, here is the money I borrowed from you. I don’t need it again.”

“Lies, not here,” the man said, “when we get back to Douala, that’s what we agreed on.”

As they were still arguing, the thieves ordered every passenger down and asked them to stand in two lines, one for those who had money and the other for those who hadn’t. Then the leader of the gang walked up to the man who had borrowed the 200,000 francs and who was standing on the line of the poor people, stared like a deadly cobra into his eyes and asked the man to hold up his right hand. The thief then conjured a gun from nowhere and drove a bullet through the man’s hand. While the man screamed and with his hand dripping blood, the gangster searched him until he discovered an undisclosed sum of money. When he next raised his head and looked down the two lines, the line of the poor had dwindled to only two miserable boys whom they did not even touch.

Chapter Thirty One

Hansel had inwardly planned to keep all the stockholders together. They must not stray too far away from his watchful eye lest they ran into information that might rock his boat. The weather kept them together. The rain which started falling in Bamenda early in the morning only began at six in Douala, long after the football match. Douala is a very muddy city and so nobody was anxious to dirty himself. They chose to remain around the hotel premises. They were to enjoy themselves every minute until they left for Bangui the next day. This explained why he opposed the move by the two youngsters, Nkwain and Cranford. These two drew him aside and told him they had some friends in town with whom they would like to pass the night. They would be grateful if they would be given the cash for their hotel bill.

“If you were here on your private capacity,” he told them, “you could do that. But you are here to represent two very important personalities, remember, on this all important mission. I can still give you some money to enjoy your youth. Youth is something to envy.”

He gave them fifteen thousand francs each, which was exactly half of the hotel bill per person. So far he was succeeding and, in continuation of that secret agenda, he told them before they dispersed to their rooms:

“Instead of the dead fish in the hotel, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to treat you to a live show. A place where the fish dies only in your belly.”

It was an open air fish market with small stalls, canopies and eating corners near small fires with customers sitting round each fishmonger on low stools, chairs and benches. Hansel chose a distant corner from which his guests would have a panoramic and refreshing view of the coastline, the great expanse of restless water bounded by a very distant horizon. Two items broke the monotony of the seascape. They were sail boats braving the gigantic force of the mighty ocean. How fearless man can be!

“What the hell could they be doing in the deep of the ocean?” somebody wondered.

“Fish,” Hansel muttered. “We are here because they are there. They keep these women supplied with fresh fish, constantly....”

There was something intensely frightening and then at the same time beautiful in the sight of the sea even in the dark: the ceaseless movement of the sea expressing itself playfully, heaping up great masses of white spray against the coastline of massive rocks then spilling it over them in wild profusion.

In the middle of the dilapidated old canopy selected by Hansel, stood a large transparent container. In the container were fishes of all sizes and varieties, swimming up and down, advertising themselves invitingly, anxious to be devoured. Presently a fat huge woman came to their table sweating at every pore with impatience to ask them what they wanted. They made their choices and were encouraged to ask for wine of their choice.

Cranford went to the kitchen to personally make his choice.

“There is a fish in there that has recognised me,” he said. “That’s the one I will eat.”

The woman sent her daughter who returned with a black fish and flat as a tray. They called it “cover pot.” Four plates of fish were ordered: one for the women, three for the groups of three men that were left. To go with the fish was bread,

roasted plantains and *bobolo*. The bill, somebody tried to verify, was 49,000 francs, the wine alone added up to 30,000 francs. Nobody was complaining about it, however, they were in very high spirits and their appetite sharpened to a stiletto by the fatiguing journey.

"Eat to your satisfaction," Hansel said. And then he added slyly: "after all it's your money." And it was indeed their money! They ate with real relish.

"How often do we go to Bangui a year, boss?"

In spite of the full mouths, everybody laughed. They got the joke, Metuge was looking forward to a repeat of the fish party.

"For as long as it lasts, my young man," Hansel said. "I know what you mean."

They would check in at that hour and leave about an hour later. Air tickets were stuck in the pigeonholes of those who were to travel, showing the reporting time which was 9 o'clock, followed by departure about an hour later.

All of them were up before six and could be seen loitering along the corridor leading to the restaurant. Breakfast was usually ready by seven. They did not seem to be conversing with each other. Everybody appeared to be preoccupied with himself. Some two or three of them were actually talking to themselves. Only the two young men Nkwain and Cranford did not seem to be disturbed by the possible outcome of the trip. In their early thirties, they were both dressed a little too informally than the others, including even those who were not travelling. There was a touch of dandyism about them and they seemed a trifle more friendly than necessary. They chatted with everybody without noticing that nobody wanted to, that they were making a nuisance of themselves.

When at 8.00 the team for Bangui was virtually ready, Metuge noticed Madam Genevieve sitting dejectedly in an armchair and covering a large pink shawl which she kept untying and throwing over her neck again uneasily.

Madam Genevieve was lodged in Room 18, Metuge in Room 20, Langmia Sylvanus in Room 8, Maurice Agenmedia in Room 24. When she left the lobby she went straight into her room with the door left unconsciously ajar, she seemed so lost in thought that she simply threw herself in bed, tossed herself back and forth as though she was suffering from some intestinal problem, before sitting up on the edge of her bed, her feet dangling as she rocked backward and forward.

As he passed to his room Metuge noticed her, knocked and entered, whistling cheerfully. There was a conversation that was interrupted during the fish meal and they were never able to continue it. She had sat by Cranford during the meal and after serving her several times he remarked almost to himself, "once a proxy, always a proxy."

"What could that mean?" she asked, a bit confused.

"I am here as a proxy for somebody else," Cranford said.

"And so?"

"And so, I am doing for you what your husband would have done if he were here," the young man said, eyeing the woman with the tail of his eye. She was wearing an enticing dress (a bit too showy for her age) that exposed portions of her upper body. She had added artificial (horsehair) to her naturally long hair so that her hair lay richly on her shoulders. The horsehair had been woven so deftly that you easily got away with the impression that she must have wonderful hair. When she raised an arm to ask for more gravy Cranford noticed a tuft of very dark hair in her armpit which lent to her ripeness, and very invitingly so, a sexy touch.

Madam Genevieve smiled and said:

"I hope you are talking only of serving *food*. Because you young men these days, you do not fear your mothers."

"Whatever goes in is food. I am strong enough to face anything," Cranford put in. He made reference to her armpit: "Madam, is this a wig I am seeing or natural hair?"

“How can you wear a wig in your armpit?” she asked, flattered by the question.

“That’s what is puzzling me,” Cranford said and went on to throw in another sexy joke. “If in just a small mosque there are so many Moslems, what can it look like in Mecca?”

Madam Genevieve nearly choked on her meal in trying to respond to the interesting joke. They had been sitting next to each other and as they exchanged bawdy jokes Cranford was conscious of a mass of flesh engulfing his shinbone. He knew it was her leg and imagined that she may be thinking that it was the leg of the table. But when he tried to withdraw his leg the woman shifted her weight towards him and clung all the more to him. Hansel scratched his head and smiled, eyeing her once more from the corner of his right eye. She appeared to have given Cranford the cue and he was about to pursue it to the logical conclusion when there was an interruption. Cranford was still anxious to discuss with her. She did not seem to be in a mood for conversation or jokes, at least not the way they did the previous night.

“What’s the matter, Madam Genevieve?” the young man enquired with much concern.

“Nothing,” the woman replied, heaved a long sigh and then sat up, straightening herself, her whole being militating against composure.

“There must be something the matter, Madam, you look disturbed. I am sure about that. Open up.”

“Yes, Cranford,” she admitted reluctantly.

It is said that from millions of years ago when man graduated from the primates, he brought over with him an extra sensory antenna which sharpens unconsciously when man senses an approaching danger, or when man knows that he is on the edge of something unpleasant. Madam Genevieve seemed to have had that rare visitation.

"I am very very disturbed, to say the least," she added. "This trip has not gone down very well with me. I have been having nightmares."

"Cheer up, Madam, there can be no reality without dreams. If you are worried about our trip, take heart, we will travel safely to and fro..."

"Hhmm!," she grunted and then shrugged resignedly.

The young man left and went to his room. When he entered his own room and lay down he gradually found himself thinking about the woman and her uneasiness. Why, he wondered, should she have any apprehensions at that particular moment. Was she seeing something he was too young to see? He decided to go back to her and probe her for more information.

"Who's there?"

"Cranford. It's me again, Madam."

"One minute."

Her travelling bag was on the table. She had been trying to change her clothes. She had actually taken off her original blouse and skirt which was so short as to deliberately expose her thighs and was about to put on her more respectable down-reaching *Kaba ngundu* when she heard the name of the person knocking. She did not bother to change fully. She simply threw her loin cloth over her breasts and under her armpits. Her entire upper body was bare except for the straps of her brassier. The loin cloth could not conceal the flabby nature of her once bulbous breasts. Against the background of her body, her face looked like a mask, a pink mask on a dark brown body, evidence that all the glamour was the result of intense bleaching and make-up. From her neck downwards, the rest of the body was light coffee-brown. When Cranford came in she did not bother to cover herself up, she did not bother to ask him to wait until she had finished.

He did not sit down, he leaned against the wall near the reading table.

“Madam, what you just said has kept me worried too.” He paused for a while. She looked at him and sighed. “I am still wondering why you said this thing is bothering you at this material hour of great anticipation. Is there something specific you have noticed which justifies that feeling?”

“Nothing,” she said as if to please Cranford and send him away. Then she sat up and put both hands between her legs and looked him in the eye and began: “You know how you feel when you take an exam and they say the results are being expected on a particular day...”

“I know, Madam.”

“Even when you know that you wrote very well, you still have butterflies.”

His brows pulled together in a mood of reflection.

“I know,” he said. “But what exam have you taken, what results are being awaited? The Bangui trip is mere formality, simply to assess the situation there with the view to transferring out here. It is nothing to fear, at least the way I see it. It can only turn out to be good. We have been enjoying the very rich fruits of our investments from day one, and the dividend just keeps rising. How is today like waiting for results?”

“It’s like that to me,” she said. “Human beings are made differently. They respond to external stimuli differently. You see, now that you have raised the point, I am glad and have to be honest with you. Long before the idea of going to Bangui was raised to me by Justice Nfor Nfor, it had crossed my mind several times. But how could I, a mere woman, dare raise a finger and introduce the matter to Prince? “

“And why not?”

She thought of telling him that from people close to him she had heard that Hansel felt unpleasant feeling of exasperated dislike for any person who violated, or even seemed desirous of disturbing his privacy. She instead said:

“You don’t know. Prince looked so distant, was such an overwhelming personality. As I said, since everybody was busy enjoying what was happening, I did not want to puncture anybody’s show with unfounded suspicions. Following him and paying for more and more of those shares was like a religion.”

Referring to his cool, calm and calculating personality which always exuded a personal magnetism, she added, “we were simply swept along or away by his hypnotic powers. He was like a Pope whom everybody believes in and respects from a great distance and you feel too infinitesimal to raise a finger or voice.”

There were very many others who were in the same soup but were unable to express themselves in the language of the woman. Unconscious of the fact that they had all come under the spell of this extraordinary individual, they were simply and irresistibly caught in the current, or they were too blinded by the dividends to notice anything amiss.

“For example, look at that football thing of yesterday. I was tired and hungry, so were many others. But as soon as he suggested football everybody fell in as if that was what had brought us down here. I slept through the match...”

“Even me, I was watching with only one eye open,” Cranford put in.

“That’s my worry...”

“But Madam, don’t you think you are over-reacting?”

“It is possible,” she admitted. “Maybe, but I must admit that I am a woman of very delicate sensibilities. Things disturb me which do not tickle others.” She smiled to herself. “I remember once when our group decided that we should all take the HIV/AIDS test, I almost fainted with fright. Fright drove my veins underneath my flesh and they had to draw blood from my forehead. After submitting the blood sample I collapsed and was on drip in the hospital when the result was brought to me. It took a whole day for me to have the sealed envelope torn open. The result was not even positive. So that’s the way I am made.”

The two of them laughed.

“Madam, we are going together and I will be by you to prove you wrong. Let’s go in and have something to eat.” They went in for breakfast, omelette, toasted bread, green beans, sausages and potato chips. Cranford was sitting with Madam Genevieve. When he offered to serve her she objected. She took only a cup of black coffee. Cranford served food in her plate and ate it all.

Apparently Cranford had not come out when the visitors had a brief but disheartening piece of information from Brother Mike, Hansel’s driver. He drove into the hotel premises at a time when they all thought the vehicle must have left for Limbe.

“Where is the boss?” somebody asked.

“He asked me to bring the vehicle to you so that you can use it to travel back in the evening,” the man told them. He did not tell them that Hansel had told him to keep the vehicle for himself or trade it in at the Japanese firm from where he bought. He had given the driver a note to take to Sunuki if he chose the latter alternative.

“Meaning that by evening he shall not have returned? And how does he travel back here?”

The driver was silent.

“He has his ways,” Godfred said. “Perhaps the Limbe Mayor could decide to send a vehicle to take him back. He is a big man, a PDG.”

“But where are you from just now?” Madam Genevieve asked.

“The airport,” the driver said.

“Not Limbe?” Agenmendia and Langmia asked at once. It was after this point that Madam Genevieve took to gnashing her teeth. One or two other persons had begun to smell a rat. They did not pursue the matter any further, something interrupted them.

Chapter Thirty Two

The actual explanation of what had happened was so bizarre that it was as difficult to believe as the completely unexpected circumstances by which the facts suddenly dropped into the laps of the astonished stockholders.

The AIR AFRIQUE bird arrived Douala and departed for Bangui on schedule. The first sign of trouble was the weather. It was a rough flight from the beginning, and halfway through they ran into such bad weather that plane jerked for about ten minutes, frightening to death people like Madam Genevieve and Limen Isidore who had never flown. Huge columns of cloud mixed with heavy rain lashed at the plane, forcing it to fly up this way, down that way. Then when Bangui was sighted they couldn't land because of fog and heavy rain in the run way. The pilot, an Italian veteran, circled the town for about ten minutes and was about to decide to go back to Douala or Ndjamena when the weather suddenly cleared. He plunged into the airport like a kingfisher diving for a fish. The passengers screamed and clung to each other until the plane bounced and skidded to a halt. It was 1.15 in the afternoon.

They went through the Customs and police and Gendarmes without the slightest problem. It was when they left the airport building that the nightmare began. They had not expected Lee Ping Yung and his men to be at the Customs or Police. But they should have been hanging around and making themselves visible while they presented

their passports to the police. This had not happened. They had imagined as they emerged from the airport building brandishing their stickers of CRABS AND SHELLS CAMEROON, to find a crowd of Chinese in green aprons and yellow baseball caps waiting anxiously to receive them. Outside the airport building there were only a handful of people. Bangui International Airport is not amongst the busiest in the world and after the other few passengers who had travelled with them took taxis away the place was empty. There were no signs of green aprons and yellow caps. Perhaps the Lee Ping Yung team got the time wrong.

They gave themselves five more minutes, which stretched to ten, fifteen, twenty and then thirty. Thoroughly confused, they went first this way and then that way like the lost sheep that they really were. During this time, Cranford completely hid his face from that of Madam Genevieve whom he believed must be staring accusingly at him. But, she was not even looking at Cranford. With a resigned acceptance of her fate she followed the others silently. Irritability turned to bitterness and bitterness turned to desperation. Then they all sighted a diminutive white man coming towards the airport building.

“That must be our man,”.

“Here comes our man,” somebody reported excitedly. Everybody sprang to their feet and immediately charged towards the little man who for a while was both afraid and embarrassed by so many people marching towards him. He turned and started walking back with quickened steps when Mr. Godfred Mukulu Foso, the Customs Inspector stepped forward and persuaded him to listen to them. He greeted the panic-stricken gentleman and proceeded to introduce himself, their mission and their problem:

“I am Godfred Mukulu Foso, retired Customs Inspector. I am a member of the CRABS AND SHELLS team from Cameroon. These are my colleagues, they are all members.

We are the team that was to come here today. You must be Mr. Lee Ping Yung.” The rest of the story was continued on the veranda into the airport building because of the threat of rain.

Still visibly trembling with fear, the man looked at them uncomprehendingly and said curtly in a mixture of bad French and English:

“Ei em tourist, merci, excusez,”

Cranford was brought in to talk to him. The man was a Japanese tourist, knew only one Chinese family whose abode he was willing to lead the visitors to. He had never heard of CRABS AND SHELLS, but that may be perhaps because he was a stranger. The Chinese man he led them to was a very old skinny, little, smiling man who ran a restaurant of oriental foods. He had been doing that for 25 years, spoke English, Spanish and Russian very well. He also spoke French.

When shown copies of their share certificate and the e-mail that had been sent to Hansel, the old man drew down the sides of his mouth, his face taut into a web of age lines which rose in contours of great surprise. Then, still clasping the document with his leathery fingers and shaking his head in grim denial he swore he had never heard of such a thing as CRABS AND SHELLS.

At the thought of what Hansel had done, a shudder shook their whole bodies as though an earth tremor had just occurred where they stood. They all felt crushed beyond mending by the weight of the inescapable explaining they would have to make. The old man said there were five other Chinese families around but they were all dealers in textiles and electronics. He knew them all personally. He said he had never heard of Lee Ping Yung, knew of no crater lake in the vicinity. In fact, there was no lake in Bangui, only swimming pools. The whole story reeked of swindle.

Like the defeated army that they were, the miserable group dispersed in different directions, each ruminating his bad fortune with the solemnity and silent circumspection which people observe when they separate after the funeral of a dear one. They had two more hours to wait, and it was like having to wait for the plane for two years. Everybody gradually converged in the lobby, some in the airport bar. Besides herself with grief and shame, Madam Genevieve was left sitting on the veranda of the old Chinese restaurant owner to whom she tried to explain the problem to the man's sympathetic ears, as though to solicit help.

"Somebody must have deceived you very bad," he said. "There are no good people anymore," was the man's verdict. "All the thieves and murderers, they look like saints. You can't trust anybody anymore."

Metuge who had been following Madam Genevieve with lascivious eyes from a distance decided to talk to her.

"You must have wonderful instincts, Madam..." he began.

She ignored the compliment. "Just leave me alone," she waved to him. Where she stood, tears of rage and frustration streamed down her cheeks as she wept in gasping choking sobs, carving deep gorges through her heavy make-up, as she stared at the others through filmy eyes in the fast fading sunshine. Her handbag slipped from her knee and fell on the dusty veranda. She eyed it fiercely as if a simple handbag were in league against her. In a perversely egotistical way she felt that everything in the universe had conspired against her. But such is the feeling of great disappointment, of impotent rage and powerlessness, that one is forced either into submissive state, refusing to acknowledge the hurt the way the men did, or one is propelled into an almost exalted state of anger.

Tears continued to rise to her tired eyes and she tried to mop them daintily, sighing. Her whole being was engulfed in tides of inexplicable weariness and grief. She thought of

the other women she represented and her grief suddenly became inconsolable. She knew how they would receive the news. They were all of little memory. They shall not recall the huge dividends which had come in as a result of her involvement in the company. They would only think of the money the man had escaped with. They would accuse her of conniving with the man to swindle their money. The weight on her heart became too unbearable. Without a home to return to and without a husband with whom to discuss the matter and seek ways and means to solve the crisis, existence now took on the nature of a windless desert in which she wandered, parched, and lost and full of exhaustion. All the young men who hang around her, eating her up, flattering her, they would not listen, they would not help her. They were simply consumers. They would simply, like birds, jump on to another branch, rather than follow a broken branch to the earth. All hope had gone from her, all joy in living had forever departed. She had lost faith in her fellows, that faith conceived in her own ingenuousness and short-sightedness.

Out of that lost faith in men, came hatred. To her all men had become treacherous beasts, prowling lustfully. No exception. She did not think this misfortune was natural. Consumed by a persecution complex engendered by her own sense of guilt, she was confident that there was something supernatural about it and there was only one person to accuse, her miserable and long-abandoned husband, Efa Jones.

Chapter Thirty Three

For Madam Genevieve, the fault was not in her but from her husband, a man, she said, who had never thought of encouraging her. For anybody who knew the woman very well, and there were very many people both inside and outside the circle of CRABS AND SHELLS, that was completely false. Her presence in the Association of Happy Widows which she now represented had generated much controversy, scandal and condemnation from many an observer.

Although she preferred to be called simply Madam Genevieve, she was Mrs. Efa Jones, a retired civil servant who was very much around and alive. Madam Genevieve belonged to that species of women who, discovering the beauties of life late, look on their past and all relationships contracted in her early life with unqualified scorn and disdain.

Genevieve's marriage to Jones was the result of an arrangement that had been concluded by her parents and those of Jones long before she was born. As part of a deal, her father had decided that should her mother give birth to a baby girl, that girl would grow up to be Jones' wife. There was nothing stranger in such an arrangement, that was the way many people got their wives. Because the baby turned out to be a girl, every other thing went on as planned and by the time she was 14 all traditional rites had been performed, dowry paid and she was ready to live with her husband. A far cry from what she was to become in future, the unhealthy conditions in which she lived and grew made her prey to many deforming diseases – yaws, small pox, chicken pox, filarial and the like – all of which left ugly scars all over her body.

With the passage of time, greater care and better health facilities the scars began to disappear. Like a reptile, by the time she had her first child, all the scars had vanished, leaving behind a woman of exceptional beauty. Her husband usually addressed her “my Queen,” referring as much to the respect with which he regarded her as to her supreme beauty. He encouraged her to attend evening classes, helping her at home to read and write. She was very easy to teach and learnt very fast. He also encouraged her to learn tailoring and finally how to run a saloon. She passed her first school leaving certificate at home, embarked on her G.C.E. Ordinary levels and had a few including Food and Nutrition, at home. Then Mr. Efa got her enrolled in the diploma programme from the University of London: L.C.P. There was no examination involved, only a major project and a questionnaire. He chose a topic for her – “The Influence of the Native Tongue on Second Language Learners in Cameroon.” He carried out the research for her and wrote out the entire project which he gave her to mail to London. She received a Grade A for her pains.

One day, from nowhere she was appointed Provincial Inspector for Food and Nutrition for the North West. Only she alone knew that she had offered herself to some well-placed authorities in Yaounde for the office. Within a year in the job she opened a small restaurant, GARDEN OF EDEN, which seemed to attract customers of very high grade. By this time her fourth and last child, Elsie, was fourteen. All her three boys had gone to Germany and Holland. The first two, brilliant boys, were already sending her money from time to time. At one time they sent her two cars, a Toyota Starlet and Carina II. They were used cars by European standards, but were as good as new.

Gradually but systematically and without any provocation, her husband began to mean less and less to her. She carried out extension work on their house, adding

a larger self-contained bedroom which she furnished to her expensive tastes and into which she moved and kept the key. She enlarged the pictures of her children and herself which she hung on the walls. She brought visitors at will to the house and into her room.

She would write to her children complaining of his neglect, his too much drinking and the like. She drove two cars, had completely bleached beyond recognition and would drive past her husband who was always on foot as if he had never known her before. Then Efa Jones went on retirement, something the woman received as if it were a heinous crime he had committed. She pushed him farther and farther to the background of her life.

Drowned in drink, Mr. Efa Jones took the relegation in good stride, consoled in the fact that before she turned bad, Genevieve had given him three very hard working sons and a girl who would never let him down. The climax of the denigration came at the ceremony which was held to inaugurate the extension of her restaurant. The M.C. a member of the family called on Jones to propose the toast. When the glasses were full, Jones rose to the centre of the floor and said:

“When a woman is comfortable, the husband is comfortable, and when the husband and wife are comfortable, the whole family can be said to be comfortable. I am thankful to God for giving me such a hardworking wife who has been able to cause us to be here to celebrate this achievement this afternoon. I can only give her my blessing because, you can now see that behind every successful woman...”

“There is a man,” the guests answered in a chorus and went on to wine and dine. When the guests were gone Genevieve called Jones and, like a mother scolding an erring kid, she bellowed:

“How dare you shame me, Jones?”

"I don't understand, Madam," he said politely.

"Yes, you can't. What was the point emphasising that you were my husband and I was your wife? You scare my customers away."

"So I am no longer your husband, Madam? I am no longer worthy to be your husband, Madam?"

She did not respond.

"May God bless you and all those whom you now think deserve to be your husband."

Mr. Jones Efa was not shocked when he heard that his wife was an executive member of the Association of Happy Widows.

Thus, returning to her home in Nkwen, while the other members were busy working out means by which to offset the heavy losses suffered at the hands of the Hansel crook, Madam Genevieve dragged the old man out of his drugged slumber, accusing him of bewitching her and causing her to lose all her money. The accusation was so forceful that he submitted to her decision that that they go to a medicine man to prove her right. Having completely subjugated him the poor man submitted and in the company of her daughter Elsie and her own brother they visited Ahadji Baba, the quintessential soothsayer in Ndop plain.

There she paid the consultation fee of 10,000 francs and then waited for the verdict. Alhadji Baba brought a basin of water into which he poured some perfume and recited some incantations, stirred the water and then, looking round said:

"Yes, Madam, your misfortunes have indeed been caused by somebody else..."

"Ehheh!" she screamed and rose to fall on Pa Efa.

"I have not finished," Alhadji Baba announced. "I said your misfortunes have been brought on you by somebody else, but that person is not here now."

Madam Genevieve looked away for a while and told the man to repeat the exercise.

“Then you pay again,” Baba said.

She agreed to pay. The man went over the ritual again and again announced that the evil doer was not there with them.

“Say you do not know how to tell fortune,” Madam Genevieve said. “Somebody is sitting here looking at you and you say he is not here? Jones, why don’t you tell him that you are the one killing me like this?” he turned to her husband.

With his head spinning with alcohol, Mr. Efa told her, “since you can tell fortune so well you should have told him at the beginning.”

Chapter Thirty Four

The Bangui International Airport might indeed be a beautiful place, but the visitors had no urge to walk round and see what the airport building or its environs looked like while they waited for their return flight. In addition to the fact that they had been fooled, there was also the flight to worry about. The bad weather persisted, rain continued to drizzle, stop and then drizzle again before breaking out into a deafening explosion of thunder and hail. The whole idea of Bangui came to represent some kind of hell to the visitors, a name they would long to forget and forget permanently. The men were generally very silent, turning over the crime in their minds, working out means of making more money to cover up the loss. Only one man dared to voice his feelings. It was the old Customs Inspector, Godfred Mukulu Foso.

“That at this twilight period of my long life, I deliver myself as a dupe into the fangs of a swindler,” he interjected, “this is a tragedy of the worst kind. It was better for my house to catch fire. People would even sympathise with you. But this kind of nonsense, where do I begin? How do I narrate the story without looking like a swine?”

In those few words the man had summed up the entire Bangui scam. In everybody’s mind, the real problem was not the money per se but the fact that they had been fooled for a whole year, something that should only happen to congenital idiots!

As he uttered those words, the slow awakening to sudden truth drove him to paroxysms of ungovernable rage which no philosophy or logic could hold back. He clenched his left and right fists and, striking them together, spoke through clenched teeth, biting furiously into his lower lip.

"When I will set hands on that Hansel devil," he vowed, "there will be nothing left of him. I will squeeze those his dry balls until he will call for his mother and father. I will smash his nose..."

He spat blood, his eyes turning red as perspiration coursed down his muscular cheeks and neck. "If he is wise he should hire a room in the mortuary at once." He paused

for a few tense seconds and exploded again: "Haha," he sneered. "Look at the sort of rats that are making a fool of me. Protect me, O' Lord, and protect him."

He did not seem to know how clever Hansel could be.

"Death sentence," Madam Genevieve put in. "Such a criminal should not live."

"You don't know me, Madam. I say when I lay hands on him there will be nothing left for the police. Unless they want to imprison his bones. Just wait and see," he swore on, his face stamped into a mask of implacable fury.

Mr. Limen Isidore had been so devastated by the discovery of the fraud which he now seemed an accomplice that he just remained silent. The truth as it unveiled itself before his own eyes, was terrible. It stupefied him, fettered his very ego. His entire being protested against what he was learning by the minute. Until then, and all through his life, he had been famous for fighting bribery and corruption, against baseness and everything that was dark, shady and evil in life. And he was proud, very proud of such fame. Now a small boy was exposing him as being unfaithful to

his fame. That was unacceptable. He would never more find within himself the strength to throw an accusing finger, to condemn immorality.

Perhaps as a result of the heat generated by the tension in him he had taken off his jacket which he hung on his thumb over his right shoulder as he paced up and down just whistling to himself. As he listened to Mr. Godfred Mukulu Foso, the enormity of the crime rose higher and higher back into his mind. He ambled towards Godfred and when he got to him he said:

“Mr. man, what you have said touched me deeply. I don’t know how much you know of me....”

“I know you very well, Mr. Limen. I knew you when you were still in service.”

“I am glad you do because you should be able to bear me out.”

Two other persons moved closer, they were Cranford and Langmia. They were both speechless.

“Both in and out of service,” Mr. Limen went on, “if there is any one thing I have protected jealously it is my honour, which this ragamuffin has dragged down in mud today. I hate hurting people and I can go to any length just to avoid doing that. People who know my days in the government service know I worked and left with very clean hands, something not many Cameroonians can boast of today. Both in and out of service I walked with my head held high up in pride.

“I believe in doing the right thing and I have spent my whole life trying to do just that. Now I am about to be linked up with a crook, a *fayman*! There are very many of us, members of CLUB 49, I say very many, who got involved in this mess because I spoke to them about it. It was my idea that we the members of the Inner Circle should find time to toast him. And they took my word for it. And I spoke to them so positively because, being the honest man

that I was born to be until I die, when I met this idiot in his office, I took him for an honest fellow, I believed every word of what he said. And now a hugely expensive joke has been perpetrated upon a group of respectful and self-respecting people, and I am directly linked with the rogue.... “

The man shook his head and bit his lips bitterly. That feeling alone seemed to paralyse any capacity for action in him or any other person.

“Look at the degree of disrespect, the total lack of any sense of morality: instead of even letting it end in Douala, he pays our tickets and allows us to board the plane to Bangui, a place I am not even sure that he has ever set foot on! And he tells us there will be people at the airport to receive us. Perhaps he was hoping that the plane would explode in mid air or what? And that almost happened! This Hansel idiot is just a child. We are old enough to be his fathers. And he has the courage, the effrontery to make laughingstocks of his fathers! This is unforgivable, it is an unpardonable misconduct.

“When a child, or when a man does this to a fellow human being, how does he hope to get away with it? Does he think of ever meeting such a person face to face? What does all this mean? Is this rat saying that nobody should be believed anymore? Is he saying that no good ideas should be accepted as genuine? God will judge him. Mark you, Mr. Godfred, the money lost is not the issue. This young man should not have done this to us. He should not even have conceived such a devilish act. It hurts, it stinks!”

Nobody remembers who suggested that they should get in touch with their comrades in Douala., but they all agreed. Cranford was asked to make the call.

“What do I tell them?” he enquired.

“Exactly what you have seen,” Godfred told him. “Are you not seeing the shame into which we have been dragged?”

Metuge dialled his pal's number 7678181.

“Yes, Nkwain, it's me Cranford.”

“Yes we reached safely and pray that we reach back safely. We leave here at 5 pm, so expect us by 7, barring any setbacks.

“How successful is the mission? Do we start popping champagne?” Nkwain was talking in his peculiarly excited tone.

“Not yet my man, not yet. We have run into a stone wall. Just pray that we return in one piece. The plane was like a horse, but that is not the point now. That Hansel guy has delivered us a knockout punch...’

“How do you mean?”

“Just what I am saying. Get this straight.” His words came tumbling over one another, and he had often to stop and draw breath in audible gasps before proceeding. “There is nobody here by the name of Lee Ping Yung, nobody has ever heard of him, there is no such thing as Crabs and Shells anywhere here, no crater lake, no nothing ...”

The line went dead and they never got in touch again until they left for Douala.

If such were the feelings of the team in Bangui, the feelings of the comrades in Douala could more be imagined than described. When they got the headlines from Metuge and communication was suddenly disrupted, they all drove to the airport where they hung around miserably until the Air Afrique plane touched down. The people on the ground received the visitors like one would, the bearer of very bad news. It was confirmed that they had been hoodwinked. Upon receipt of the news from Bangui, somebody from Douala had already contacted the police in Bamenda whom they were informed to seal the Crabs and Shells office.

The team travelled overnight and by 7 O'clock they were already at the Crabs Office. Out of an enrolment of close to two hundred registered members in all the categories, only a handful of shareholders actually showed up, just about twenty. And these were not even amongst the heavy

weights. They were mostly one, two or three-share holders. The majority of them, the very rich investors simply shied away. Ashamed to be associated with the company which now bore the greatest stigma, they either watched from a respectable distance or followed the proceedings in the newspapers and radio which immediately found much to write and talk about.

As of noon on Friday nothing had still been heard about Hansel. The Commissioner for Special Branch who had himself sunk five million francs in the scam, personally led a team of five to the Crab Head Office. What they saw weakened them all the more. The office doors were all open and they found four young men cleaning the floor. A gentleman in a brown suit was supervising the work. The Commissioner greeted the man in suit who introduced himself as Philemon Kaka, the regional representative of Secour Insurance.

“What’s going on here?” the Commissioner asked.

“We are cleaning the place to move in,” Philemon said.

The Commissioner looked at his comrades who were just as confused as himself.

“Is this not the property of CRABS AND SHARES?”

“I think it used to be, sir. It was advertised some months back and my company bought it. It was agreed that We would move in whenever CRABS AND SHARES moved out. The Managing-Director of CRABS, Prince Hansel Bolingo phoned us two days ago to say we could move in today.”

The Commissioner obtained permission to go in and look round. He did not tell the new owner of the house what had happened to them. He simply said he wanted to check a few things out.

To make things easy for the investigators or the new occupants, Hansel had left a bunch of keys on the central table which enabled them to enter every room without having to break in. The bunch even included the keys to the cashier’s safe and the smaller one in his own office.

On the table in a corner in his office where a bright table work lamp stood there was an item which, but for the fact that they were blinded by their fury, would have given them a clue to the source of the Chinese news magazine which did so much in convincing shareholders and outsiders alike, of the seriousness of the venture. There was a magazine, CHINESE OVERSEAS INVESTMENT NEWS. The cover picture, about the size of an A5 paper, had been carefully cut out and in its place had been glued a scanned picture of Hansel and his Japanese friend in Douala inspecting a coffee hauling machine. All that needed to be done was to scan the cover and re-staple it and you had a magazine made in China and advertising the activities of Hansel and his associates in Cameroon. Inside, too, the TABLE OF CONTENTS had been redone to show an article on Cameroon by the Chinese Editor. Once he had doctored a magazine, not even an expert could tell that his version containing news from Cameroon was not exactly as it had been published in China.

The small safe contained packets of signed copies of worthless gold-rimmed CRABS AND SHELLS SHAREHOLDERS CERTIFICATES and receipt booklets. The policemen were then led to the cashier's house. Salomey was at home. She had been told not report for work until she had received further instructions. The same notice had been given to the other workers.

The entire staff, they discovered for the first time, were merely clerical helpers and field workers who truly and honestly had no idea that anything unethical was going on. Doggedly, the Commissioner pursued his investigation, the number of members following him had dwindled to just a handful. Most of them felt ashamed to be associated with the theft. Later that day he was led to Salomey who had been restrained from sinking her 1.5 million francs in the hoax. They found her sipping a Gordon Spark at a table under the shade in front of JANNA SUPERMARKET.

“SUPER J,” the names customers usually called the young proprietor of the business stood at a corner reading a newspaper. He was one of the very few businessmen who had not been attracted by the Bangui scam. Salomey spoke to him a few times but, for some inexplicable reason, he decided to “wait and see.” On one occasion when Salomey became very insistent, pointing to the wealth shareholders were making by the minute, SUPER J. said:

“Madam, I am a suffer man from birth. I have never had anything easy. Perhaps if I put my money inside I may not make the kind of money that the others are making. I have never had a franc without sweating for it.” And so it ended. He would thank his God for the rest of his life.

Salomey was terrified by the notoriety that suddenly engulfed her. She was utterly appalled to learn that her good old friend had become a wanted man overnight. But although she suddenly found herself without a job, she took comfort in the fact that Hansel had helped put up a house for her, in her own name.

She swore, and she was honest about it, that she knew nothing concerning Hansel’s whereabouts. He was such a secretive person that it was not easy for anybody to guess what he could be planning at any given time. She showed them a text message Hansel had sent to her in the morning of the day before:

“Today is D-Day and I go to face it like a man or perish.

If we do meet again, we shall smile.

If not, this parting were well made.”

“That’s like him,” somebody confirmed. “That crook may not still be in this country for all I know,” a policeman remarked when it was confirmed that his wife and children had left the country some weeks before. It was when it became known that he had long left the country that Salomey began to think back on certain comments Hansel was in the habit of making. On more than one occasion he

had told her, "Remember, Salomey, that you only work for me. Your business is only to receive money, issue receipts and hand over the money to me."

"But is that not what I do?" she asked.

"I am just making sure," Hansel had said.

"You make me nervous and suspicious," she had told him. "You have said this several times before..."

"I forgot that I did," he had said, "I just wanted to make sure..."

"To make sure that..."

"Forget."

And they forgot about it all.

Chapter Thirty Five

The crook was certainly not in the country. As a matter of fact, at that moment when they were worrying about where he could be hiding, he was having supper with his family in Washington. He was one of the passengers on board the Swiss Air jet that left for Zurich at 7.30 on Thursday morning, the same Thursday morning that the suckers were to leave for Bangui.

He had left nothing to chance, having cleaned all his bank accounts and safe deposits in advance of his departure. Even if their investigations were finally very good, they would never know the precise figure that he had made. Their investigators would definitely continue to have nightmares trying to come up with precise information. The cashier's register would show a certain number of persons and a certain amount of money, probably not exceeding 100 million francs. But that could only be part of the truth. What becomes of the very big personalities and Government, the Secretary Generals, Colonels and bigwigs who got registered by proxy, attended meetings by proxy and received their dividends by proxy. He simply kept a diary as they never wanted their names to be publicized. Now more than ever, they even had a better reason to dissociate themselves from the company. These were never to be known, the better for him.

Hansel wondered how much was known and how much would ever be known about his activities. One thing was certain, he owed nobody apologies or explanations. It was the only thing to do. His people would grumble, whine and curse that he refused to accept their money at a time when

he was minting money and throwing about at relatively unfamiliar persons, they would blame him for denying them the opportunity to share in those generous dividends which had become the talk of the town. But in their heart of hearts, in the comfort of their beds and the secret of their homes, and in the light of how things had now turned out, they would admit that in the final analysis he did them well in preventing them from sinking their money into a bottomless pit.

There was one very important of fleeing the country, quite apart from the fact that it put him completely out of the reach of his pursuers: his affair with Salomey. There was no way they were to meet again, and that was very good news for Marion. Their marriage was finally saved, although it would leave an indelible scar on the psyche.

Undeniably, he had given the police something to worry about, some food for thought. If their investigations were good enough, they would sooner or later discover that all those phone calls made each time he was in council emanated from the small documentation office on the other side of the street, and that the owner had been given a list of addresses to use each time he made a call. They would discover that Lee Ping Yung, Bangui, Crabs and Shells and the like were simply fictions of his fertile imagination. Again, if their investigations were good enough they would sooner or later discover that all the e-mails came from one single person, Hansel Bolingo who prepared them in his laptop, stored them in a diskette and then dispatched them to himself each time he thought necessary.

He felt no moral scruples about what he had done. God was on his side. The fact that he had done all that and had got away with it without any embarrassment, meant that his actions had the blessings and the protection of God. For one thing, he had made sure that he did not take money from anybody for whom that money was his *all*. He did not

take money from anybody poorer than himself. He did not take from personal friends and relatives. As far as his good old sweetheart Salomey was concerned, he was happy that he had, in lay man's language, "settled her." A less careful man finding himself in so much money would have made it a point to keep a girl in every street. But he hadn't done that. He had stuck to his old friend, turning a blind eye on any other women. He had simply put his money into use.

People who would describe his action as immoral were free to do so. It is well and good to preach the organization of moral conduct within self-regarding sentiment as the highest form of morality. But be it known that a moral character is impossible to one lacking in a strongly developed self-regarding sentiment. That is something that usually comes with comfortable living. It does not come to a man whose wife and children are starving, a man who once tasted money but who now owed every social group to which he or his wife once belonged.

Since being thrown out of the bank, he had learnt that society imposes insults that must be borne, comforted by the knowledge that in this world there comes a time when the most humble of men, if he keeps his eyes open, can take his revenge on the most powerful. Such a time was now.

Every man lives for himself, using his freedoms to attain his personal aims, and feels with his whole being that he can at any moment perform or not perform this or that action; but, as soon as he has done it, that action accomplished at a certain moment in time becomes irrevocable and belongs to history, in which it has not a free but a predestined significance.

There are two sides to the life of every man; there is his individual existence which is free in proportion as his interests are abstract; and his elemental life as a unit in the human swarm in which he must inevitably obey the laws laid down for him.

Man lives consciously for himself but unconsciously he serves as an instrument for the accomplishment of historical and social ends. A deed done is irrevocable, and that action of his coinciding in time with the actions of millions of other men assumes an historic significance. The higher a man stands in the social scale, the more connections he has with others and the more power he has over them, the more conspicuous is the predestination and inevitability of every act he commits.

Titles by *Langaa* RPCIG

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Every man lives for himself, using his freedoms to attain his personal aims, and feels with his whole being that he can at any moment perform or not perform this or that action... The higher a man stands in the social scale, the more connections he has with others and the more power he has over them, the more conspicuous is the predestination and inevitability of every act he commits. Upon this philosophy, a former banker, Hansel Bolingo, suddenly finds [or makes] himself the regional representative of a Chinese firm that deals in crabs in Bangui. This catapults him into a position of instant wealth. His mouth-watering affluence draws immediate attention while his hypnotic powers cause hundreds of [not-so-honest]citizens to clamour for shares from which he builds up a huge fortune. But he soon discovers that he cannot deceive everybody all the time.

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